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Cuba and the United States: Back to the Beginning

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# Cuba and the United States: Back to the Beginning

By MARK FALCOFF

The publication—after the usual thirty-year delay—of the U.S. diplomatic documents relating to the collapse of the Batista regime in Cuba and the emergence of Fidel Castro comes at a particularly propitious moment.<sup>1</sup> For the first time in decades, Washington is faced with the prospect of serious political change on the island and, with it, the need to redefine a relationship heavily fraught with historical baggage.

Obviously, nobody can say when that change will occur or what form it will take. But it certainly will be no less traumatic for Cubans than the upheavals of 1898, 1933, or 1959—events that in one way or another redefined the very nature of the Cuban nationality and, therefore, also the country's relationship with its most important neighbor. At the same time, because Cuba's problems have had a way of becoming our own, this volume of *Foreign Relations of the United States* helps us to understand how we got where we are today.

Under review are some six hundred documents, including cable traffic between the U.S. embassy in Havana and the State Department; minutes of meetings of the National Security Council, the Cabinet, and inter-agency working groups; memoranda of conversations with President Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles (later, Christian Herter); and special National Intelligence Estimates (NIEs) on Cuba produced by the CIA at the request of the executive branch.

It will probably surprise no one that there is little in this volume likely to revise the conventional historiography of U.S.-Cuban relations. That is, those who believe that the blame for the current state of affairs lies entirely with the United States—either for sup-

porting Batista or for pushing an idealistic Castro into the arms of the Soviet Union or, more likely, both—will have to continue their search for the “smoking gun”; it certainly will not be found here.

Nor is there much new in the way of hard information on this crucial period. The main lines of the story related in the documents—the agony and collapse of the Batista regime, the accession of Fidel Castro, the growing confrontation with the United States, and, finally, the break in diplomatic relations and the imposition of economic sanctions—is already well known. However, these documents do add a crucial sense of texture and some new and unexpected wrinkles to the story.

The most important of these is the sense of widespread confusion and disagreement among the various parties involved in Cuban policy during these crucial thirty-six months—Departments of State, Treasury, Agriculture, and Defense; the U.S. business community in Cuba; the White House and Congress; and last but not least, the American press. (We are continually reminded that in those unimaginably remote pre-Vietnam days, both Congress and press were often inclined to be nationalistic and even bellicose.)

These documents lay bare the fact that until quite late in the day there was no single, crisp response to the events in Cuba, nor—given the complexity of American interests there—could there easily have been. For much of the time, Washington was engaged in a complicated balancing act—between those who wanted to allow the government in Cuba greater latitude for self-correction and those who wanted to land on it full-force; between those who favored economic weapons to discipline the Castro regime and those who feared the loss of an important market; above all, between those who wanted to deal with Cuban events in isolation, and those who pre-

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ferred to see them in their wider global (that is, cold war) context. Only toward the end of the period covered in these documents did the Eisenhower administration definitively shift from the former to the latter, and that only when the Soviet Union's involvement in the island (and Cuba's voluntary alignment with Moscow) made any other response impossible.

### GETTING BATISTA OUT

General Fulgencio Batista had come to power in Cuba through a coup d'état in March 1952, so that at the time the volume opens, he was about to complete his (self-designated) six-year presidential term. Though he ruled as a dictator, Batista was no ordinary Latin American martinet; he had been freely elected to the presidency in 1940, and presided over a remarkably progressive government during World War II, with the support and even for a time the participation of the Communist party. His return to power in 1952, after eight years of highly corrupt and grossly ineffective administration by civilian politicians, had been greeted with frank relief by some Cubans and by massive indifference on the part of others.

By early 1958, however, Batista had exhausted his political credit with the Cuban public, including important sectors of the business community. He was now facing growing civic opposition consisting of not only unemployed politicians, but jurists, academics, professionals, students, and labor leaders. Though Fidel Castro's 26th of July movement was already active in the Sierra Maestra mountains in the easternmost province of Santiago, it was the civic opposition—which most nearly represented the major forces of opinion—that dominated the political scene in 1956 and 1957.

Batista's refusal to come to terms with this relatively moderate political force was based on the cynical calculation that by simply digging in, he would force open the potential divisions within its ranks, eventually rendering it irrelevant. In this he was correct: by early 1958, the civic opposition was beginning to fall apart. What Batista failed to see was that under such circumstances Cubans would not necessarily turn back to him, but would turn to whatever alternative remained. As 1958 wore on, *faute de mieux* Fidel Castro became the logical and inevitable focus of opposition sentiment.

Batista regarded the United States embassy as an important pawn in this game, since—like most Cubans—he held fast to the notion that Washington possessed the power to make and unmake governments on the island. This was evidently untrue, but its widespread acceptance throughout Cuba meant that all actions taken by the United States, including ones of mere symbolic value, acquired the potential of becoming major political facts. This point was driven home to Washington continually by the serving American ambassador, Earl E. T. Smith.

In the years since our Cuban debacle, Smith—a Florida investment banker and major contributor to the Republican party—has not enjoyed good press. At the time of his retirement, he was regarded as the very anti-model of an American ambassador in Latin America, someone who—through his lack of academic preparation (he did not speak or understand Spanish), ignorance of the country to which he was accredited, and uncritical support of an unpopular dictator—managed to permanently damage his country's interests.

The cables in this volume suggest a rather different picture. They reveal Smith to be remarkably well-informed on Cuban events and tragically prophetic as to that nation's future. Rather than specifically pro-Batista, he might be described as rigidly (and, as it turned out, prematurely) anti-Castro. But his purpose is clear: not so much to sustain Batista's dictatorship as to prevent it from collapsing until it could be replaced by free and fair elections, which were promised for June 1958 (and subsequently postponed to November).

This proved a far from easy task. By early 1958, Batista was playing a cat-and-mouse game with the State Department over restoration of constitutional guarantees. Washington's view was that both these and an atmosphere conducive to free and fair elections were necessary antecedents to further shipment of arms to the Cuban government; Havana, on the other hand, regarded the latter as a necessary precondition to reestablish its credibility and "negotiate from strength" with its opponents.

Meanwhile, some members of Congress and one or two democratic Latin American governments were beginning to complain that—in violation of existing treaties—U.S. military equipment sold to Cuba for "hemispheric defense" was being used for internal

purposes, including, it was (incorrectly) alleged, napalm for the bombing of civilian populations. Washington demanded assurances from Batista that this was not the case. Smith argued that such a demand was both unrealistic and improper. ("If we feel that such use of MAP equipment is improper, [the] only way to be sure of avoiding it is to refuse to supply [it] in the first place.")<sup>2</sup>

The Department obliged him on 14 March 1958 by promptly putting a permanent hold on the shipment of both armored cars and M-1 rifles, the "psychological effect" of which, the ambassador cabled, "may bring about [the] overthrow of Batista."<sup>3</sup> While its effect was less devastating than that, Smith was right to note a drastic shift in the political landscape; by embargoing arms shipments, the United States had not—as it thought—taken itself out of Cuba's civil strife, but rather placed rebels and government on a plane of equality.

The change in mood was obvious not only in Havana but in Washington. Acting Secretary Christian Herter wrote Smith that "from here it appears that [the] Batista regime has utterly failed to convince [the] Cuban people and certainly [the] U.S. public of its intention to carry out free elections." It asked for an immediate estimate of "its ability to survive [the] present crisis and for how long." The same cable called for an analysis of alternatives, including an evaluation of Fidel Castro.<sup>4</sup>

Between March and November, the cable traffic is dominated by two issues. The first is a tug-of-war between Ambassador Smith and the State Department over the resumption of arms shipments. The embassy in Havana outlined with considerably cogency the methodological impossibility of isolating U.S. equipment and personnel trained to use it from the main fighting forces of the Cuban army, which were by now engaged in fighting Castro's rebels. The Department, however, was beginning to worry that bombing and strafing rebel areas might lead to "reprisals against Americans." One visiting official even suggested that the U.S. government "should consider the evacuation of our people from the area and perhaps from other areas in Cuba [as well]."<sup>5</sup>

The other issue had to do with elections. Batista knew that, all things being equal, his hand-picked candidate, Andres Rivero Agüero, stood little chance of succeeding

him. Therefore, he balked at restoring constitutional guarantees until the last possible minute, effectively preventing the opposition from organizing a campaign of its own. By late July, the State Department was despairing that there was little prospect of "anything resembling an acceptable election in Cuba." This could only redound to the benefit of Castro's 26th of July movement, which the Department regarded "so far [as having] given no indication of political or moral responsibility."

The same document admitted that the arms embargo had not convinced Batista to lift his state of siege and allow normal political life, putting the Department in the uncomfortable position of having to weigh "an expiring unpopular regime" against "an incoherent cluster of revolutionary groups whose total uncoordinated efforts add up to nothing but a vacuum."<sup>6</sup> For his part, Ambassador Smith responded that "instead of winning friends in Cuba, the [net] result of our neutral position is to please no one."<sup>7</sup> It was a situation that the United States would face many times in the future, in Latin America and elsewhere.

The elections were scheduled for 3 November. By mid-August, Foreign Minister Gonzalo Güell was informing Ambassador Smith that promised plans to restore civic rights some forty-five days prior to the event were no longer feasible—this time because military progress against Castro's rebels had not gone as well as expected. This state of affairs, the minister archly added, was "due to the failure of the GOC to receive the necessary arms from the United States."<sup>8</sup> Though Smith was disappointed, he cabled Washington that he still hoped that the government's overthrow could be avoided until it had the opportunity to transfer power to its successor, and in the meanwhile begged Washington not to discourage "other nations" (Belgium, Canada, and Great Britain) from selling arms to Batista if the need arose.<sup>9</sup>

The elections went off on 3 November as anticipated—that is, with Batista's candidate winning by default. Ambassador Smith tried to blunt the effect by arguing to Washington that the elections, though far from perfect (!), were still better than none at all. Ironically, President-elect Rivero Agüero seemed to hold a more modest view of his own prospects, since he told Smith over lunch a few days after his victory of his intention of abbreviating his presidential term to two years and call-

ing a constituent assembly to allow Cubans to iron out their political differences.<sup>10</sup>

Other Cubans, including members of the high command of the Cuban army, had even less confidence in the new president's prospects; a civilian sent to Washington by the generals urged the State Department on 18 November to support a preemptive coup (with civilian support) to forestall Rivero Agüero's inauguration on 24 February 1959.

When a senior American diplomat expressed

not support, even *in ovo*, the government of Rivero Agüero.

This amounted to a death warrant for the regime. Some of its highest functionaries—civilian and military—either headed for exile in the United States or sought to make their peace with Castro's rebels. Castro himself grew to mythic proportions in a matter of days, as he rushed forward to fill the political vacuum. So much was this the case, that when Batista finally agreed to resign on 31 December 1958, the State Department was forced to concede that they could not deny Castro a place on the junta that Ambassador Smith was hastily trying to cobble together.<sup>14</sup> As this information was being received in Washington, Batista, his family, and his closest collaborators were fleeing Cuba in private planes for the Dominican Republic.

### **The high command of the Cuban army believed that any indication . . . for change would solve Cuba's problems in seven minutes.**

considerable skepticism, the intermediary insisted that "any indication by us of a desire for change would 'solve Cuba's problems in seven minutes.'" <sup>11</sup>

#### **BETWEEN BATISTA AND CASTRO: THE PAWLEY PLAN**

In late November, Ambassador Smith returned to Washington to argue for support for the new government, including a token shipment of arms. Secretary Dulles told Smith that neither were possible "unless and until there is evidence that [Rivero Agüero's] program has the support of major segments of the population."<sup>12</sup>

Meanwhile, without Smith's knowledge, the State Department and the CIA had delegated William D. Pawley, former ambassador to Peru and Brazil, to visit Batista privately and offer him the opportunity to live with his family in Florida if he agreed to name a caretaker government—a civil-military junta composed of five of his political opponents. This would provide the United States with an acceptable government to which to ship arms, and would forestall the victory of Fidel Castro. Since Pawley's mission was unofficial, however, he could not offer Batista the ironclad assurances he demanded. The dictator, therefore, showed him to the door.<sup>13</sup> Two weeks later, on 14 December, Ambassador Smith received instructions to "pull the plug" on Batista—that is, to inform the Cuban government that the United States would

#### **WHO WAS CASTRO?**

From the very beginning, the Batista government tried to represent Castro and his movement as Communist to the embassy and the State Department. These charges were viewed with considerable skepticism, but, as 1958 wore on, Washington demanded increasing amounts of information about the rising revolutionary leader.

The confusion was understandable. In the first place, Castro denied being a Communist, but what is even more to the point, so did his Argentine associate Ernesto ("Che") Guevara when directly questioned by Homer Bigart of the *New York Times*.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the chief appeal of Castro and his movement was its calculated ideological ambiguity. As the U.S. consul in Santiago explained to Washington, the revolutionaries represented "anything and everything to anyone and everyone. . . . The Castro movement has an unusual appeal to all sectors of Cuban society, either legitimate or convenient."<sup>16</sup>

In the second place, the relevant agencies of the U.S. government were unable to uncover any concrete evidence of Communist connections, possibly because there were none to be found until very late in the year, when (we now know) the Cuban party made its first démarches to the Castro movement. The result was a kind of vague discomfort that was not very helpful in making difficult policy choices. A good example is the report of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (I&R) at the Department of State in April that there is "little about [the] top leadership [of the 26th

of July] to inspire confidence. . . . Although the evidence available to the Department does not confirm the Cuban government's charge that Castro is a Communist, it does suggest that he is immature and irresponsible."<sup>17</sup>

By late September, when Castro's prospects had perceptibly improved, there was a call for fresh information. The Division for Research and Analysis for the American Republics explained that "the best information which we have at hand supports the belief that Fidel Castro is not a Communist and that Communists do not play a dominant role in the leadership of the 26th of July Movement." But it hedged its bets by adding that "our information is not as conclusive as we would like."<sup>18</sup>

At a meeting of the National Security Council on 23 December—that is, little more than a week before Batista's collapse—CIA director Allen Dulles suddenly argued that "the Communists appear to have penetrated the Castro movement, despite some effort by Fidel to keep them out. If Castro takes over in Cuba, Communist elements can be expected to participate in the government."<sup>19</sup> This assessment caused President Eisenhower to sit up and demand to know why an issue of this importance was being brought up only now—with Batista evidently in extremis. The ensuing minute makes fascinating reading:

The Vice President [Nixon] said . . . we could not support Batista in order to defeat Castro. [1 sentence (1 ½ lines) not declassified].

Mr. Allen [USIA director] wondered why the U.S. should attempt to prevent a Castro victory. Mr. Dulles said there was a feeling Castro was backed by extremely radical elements. The Vice President [Nixon] pointed out it would be undesirable to take a chance on Communist domination of Cuba, which had one of the largest Communist parties in the hemisphere in proportion to population. . . .

The President believed the U.S. should take a position progressives could support. Mr. Quarles [Deputy Secretary of Defense] thought there was no "third force" . . . to support. The President saw hope of a "third force" growing in strength and influence if it were organized around an able man and provided with money and arms. Secretary Herter felt a contingency paper was needed.<sup>20</sup>

Within hours of Castro's victory, Secretary Herter was reporting that the best intelligence on the subject is that "[Communist] infiltration has taken place but [its] extent and degree of influence [are] not yet determined from the evidence available." To which he

added, "It is . . . clear that [the] 26th of July Movement has shown little sense of responsibility or ability to govern Cuba satisfactorily, and that its nationalistic line is [a] horse which Communists know well how to ride."<sup>21</sup>

Of course, to Cubans—if not to Americans—Castro himself was far from an unknown, having been active in politics since his university days. Indeed, he was even a candidate for the Cuban Congress in the 1952 elections that were never held. In 1956, he and a group of companions attempted to seize the Moncada fortress in Santiago de Cuba, the island's second largest city, a foolhardy venture that led to his trial and imprisonment. Amnestied in 1955, he had moved to Mexico, from where he launched another revolutionary expedition the following year, establishing his base in the Sierra Maestra mountains of Eastern Cuba.

When they were not trying to tar Castro with the Communist brush, Batista's people were often quite accurate in their evaluations, or at least prescient. For example, President-elect Rivero Agüero told Ambassador Smith that there was really no point in attempting to reach a settlement with Castro, whose basic interest was in preventing a negotiated outcome rather than promoting it. He characterized the rising rebel leader as "a sick man . . . consumed by an overwhelming ambition to overthrow the Government by force."<sup>22</sup> Foreign Minister Güell told the U.S. envoy that "if Castro succeeds, Cuba will have a real dictatorship. With Castro's Communistic projected program, [the] situation in Cuba will be worse than in [any] Latin American country—and that includes Guatemala."<sup>23</sup> While Smith seems not to have bought the Communist charges, he did feel that the United States could not do business with Fidel Castro.<sup>24</sup>

## THE UNITED STATES FACES THE REVOLUTION

Roughly two-thirds of the cables in this volume deal with the period between Castro's assumption of power on New Year's Day, 1959, and the decision of the United States to break with the regime in the final days of 1960. Between January-April 1959, the United States attempted to come to terms with the new government, naming a new ambassador and establishing contact with its authorities, many of whom turned out to be moderates or even conservatives well known to the embassy and the U.S. business community. The high point

of this period was Fidel Castro's visit to the United States in April.

The second period, from May to October, is dominated by the promulgation of an agrarian reform law that struck frontally at an important segment of the U.S. agribusiness community. In the third, from October 1959 to January 1960, the last moderates had left the government, leading Washington to pin its hopes on the emergence of a respectable anti-Castro opposition. The fourth runs from January to April 1960, when the U.S. ambassador was recalled and the Eisenhower administration began to formulate a plan of covert action against the regime.

The fifth, from April-July 1960, is characterized by a new policy intended to weaken the Cuban economy, undermine support for Castro, and lead to political change. The sixth, from July-September, deals with the response by the United States (and to some degree the Organization of American States) to increased Soviet support for the Cuban government. The seventh and last (September-December, 1960) deals with the considerations that led up to severance of diplomatic relations.

Much of the controversy surrounding the current non-relationship between the United States and Cuba swirls about different interpretations or uses of chronology. Was Castro "pushed" into the arms of the Soviet Union, or did he "jump" of his own accord? Was he reacting against an arrogant, insensitive United States, or was he pursuing a course of action upon which he had decided in advance? What do the documents in this volume contribute to this controversy?

*There was really no "honeymoon" with the Castro regime, but neither was the United States rigidly and unalterably opposed to working with the new government.* While the U.S. government and business community were unenthusiastic about Castro's victory, both favored immediate recognition of the new regime. Ambassador Smith was immediately replaced by Philip Bonsal, a career diplomat with extensive Latin American experience, who was regarded as—and in fact, was—"softer" than his predecessor. Batista, languishing in the Dominican Republic, was repeatedly refused a visa to enter the United States. The embassy in Havana recognized that the new government was a coalition of several tendencies, with the Communists by no means the most powerful. Chargé Daniel

Braddock, who thought Castro had an ambivalent attitude towards the United States, urged "a cautious and restrained policy."<sup>25</sup>

Almost from the very beginning, however, the new government gratuitously engaged in fiery anti-American rhetoric, supposedly inspired by the role the United States had played in supporting Batista. Old charges of napalm were revived to stir up popular emotions, even though, as Washington now discovered, during the previous six months it was Castro, not Batista, who had been the principal recipient of U.S. arms, albeit clandestinely.<sup>26</sup> Within two weeks of his victory, Castro was accusing the U.S. military mission in Havana of "spying," and demanding its recall. Castro and Guevara began to support rebel expeditions in neighboring countries—the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, even Panama.

At the same time, sensational show trials of former Batistiano officials and collaborators—followed by drumhead executions—were taking place at various places around the island. The speed and, above all, the lack of concern for judicial niceties with which these took place led to considerable criticism in the U.S. press, which Castro himself took as a personal affront. (After Hiroshima, he declared in one speech, the United States had no moral right to call others to account.) In another speech, on 5 February, Castro attributed his country's perennial economic troubles to "dictation by U.S. ambassadors."<sup>27</sup>

During this same period, moderate and conservative members of Castro's government were trying to set up a visit for him to the United States. This, they hoped, would smooth out some of the problems in bilateral relations, and at the same time influence him in a sensible direction at home. Before the White House and State Department had an opportunity to reach a decision, Castro had gone ahead and accepted an invitation to address the American Society of Newspaper Editors in Washington.

This put the Eisenhower administration in an extremely embarrassing position. At a meeting of the National Security Council on 26 March 1959, the president and his closest advisors actually contemplated refusing Castro a visa, but were finally persuaded to stand down by Allen Dulles, who said that "there was a slow-growing movement against Castro in Cuba [and] we must be careful not to do anything which would tend to discourage its

growth." The cancellation of the Castro speech, he suggested, "might be such an action."<sup>28</sup> The Department therefore set into motion the mechanisms for what protocol refers to as a "Working Visit."

Much criticism in retrospect has been levelled at President Eisenhower for failing to receive Castro when he came to Washington, particularly since the Cuban prime minister (as he was from 14 February) was fobbed off on Vice President Richard Nixon. In fact, however, Eisenhower's decision to be away from the capital predated knowledge of the visit. Indeed, the president told Herter on 31 March that if for some reason his plans changed, "disagreeable as it might be, he would, if here, see [Castro] at his office."<sup>29</sup> Moreover, Castro accepted "with pleasure" the prospect of meeting Vice President Nixon in Eisenhower's place.<sup>30</sup>

Contrary to what Nixon has later said in his memoirs and elsewhere, his meeting with the new Cuban leader was almost cordial. According to the vice-president's own memorandum of the meeting, they argued at length about Castro's decision to postpone elections for four years; his opposition to private capital in the development of Cuba; his treatment by the American press. Nixon seems to have liked Castro, or at least admired his evident leadership abilities, though, as minuted for the record, "he is either incredibly naive about Communism or under Communist discipline—my guess is the former."<sup>31</sup> For his part, Castro later put it out that Nixon had spent much of his time defending the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua.<sup>32</sup>

*There was no "lost opportunity" to buy Castro off with offers of economic aid.* It has been known for some time that Castro had instructed his financial advisors who accompanied him to Washington not to ask for U.S. aid.<sup>33</sup> The documentation here goes even further, revealing that moderate elements "in or near the government" were urging the embassy in Havana to postpone aid *even in the event that it were requested*, at least until Castro (1) ceased his anti-American rhetoric, (2) curbed growing Communist infiltration of the government, and (3) modified his radical socio-economic measures, such as a highly unrealistic rent control law. "They express [the belief]," Braddock cabled, that "U.S. assistance now would postpone [the] date for [a] showdown on [the] economic situation."<sup>34</sup>

Indeed, the embassy reported, a number of

people within the government were confiding to it the "hope that [the] U.S. will be firm in handling Castro, and either force him to reverse his present trends of irresponsibility and radicalism internally and neutrality internationally or break with him."<sup>35</sup> In Washington with Castro, Cuban Central Bank President Felipe Pazos confided to officials at State and Treasury that he felt himself helpless in the face of other, closer and more important advisers. Having been ordered not to request economic assistance, Pazos confined himself to asking for an increase in the Cuban sugar quota.

This evident division between Castro and his senior economic advisors apparently persuaded the Eisenhower administration that the new regime was a shaky affair that might not last. This impression was certainly underpinned by cables from Havana explaining that "Cubans opposed to Communism, both in and out of the government, are beginning to take firm and outspoken stands."<sup>36</sup> Castro's economic policies, such as they were, were so unrealistic that it was difficult to imagine how—in the absence of massive Soviet aid of a type that was then considered unlikely—the government could satisfy the country's basic needs.

*Land reform was a serious irritant, but it was overruled by other U.S. interests and concerns.* On 17 May 1959, a new agrarian reform law was promulgated that, in effect, confiscated the properties of large American land and mill owners in Cuba. This provoked a more complicated response from Washington than Castro himself has subsequently claimed.<sup>37</sup> In the first place, the State Department accepted immediately Cuba's right to expropriate; its objection arose from the provisions for compensation, which did not pretend to take U.S. properties on the island at anything like their true value. However, even this was not viewed as an insuperable difficulty; the Department instructed Bonsal to urge the Cuban government to enter into negotiations leading to a satisfactory settlement.<sup>38</sup>

In the second place, although agribusiness was an important part of the \$774 million in U.S. investment in Cuba, it was by no means the only economic interest there. Indeed, the sugar quota, which reserved for Cuba about 25 percent of the U.S. domestic market, flooded the island with hard currency, creating a huge market for American products,



from insurance to wholesale groceries, from the sale of movie tickets to electrical appliances and automobiles. Thus, even as late as December 1959, when the American business community as a whole was beginning to see in Castro's cavalier treatment of U.S. property a dangerous example that might spread elsewhere in Latin America, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in Havana was still opposing punitive suspension of the sugar quota.<sup>39</sup>

Third, Cuba's prearranged position in the

### **The Cubans thought Washington's reluctance to abolish the quota overnight meant that the United States could not live without Cuban sugar.**

U.S. domestic sugar market meant that it was not possible to abolish its quota overnight without causing serious shortages and disruptions at home. At one point, the Eisenhower administration even thought that it might be necessary to ration sugar until several growing seasons had elapsed and the import quota could be reallocated.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, decisions about the domestic sugar market were made on a four-year basis by the Agriculture Department, the next quadrennium of which was supposed to begin in mid-1960. Given the uncertainties created by the new situation on the island, Washington was understandably reluctant to act precipitously.

Fourth, there was a genuine fear in Washington that punitive use of the sugar quota—quite apart from contravening GATT rules, and also the norms of the Organization of American States (OAS)—would have counterproductive political effects in Cuba itself. As Secretary Rubottom noted in early December 1959, such an act would strengthen, not weaken, Castro domestically, and would disarm the growing opposition on the island. Another consideration, presumably not a small one, was the need to keep the Cuban economy sufficiently viable to eventually compensate American companies for their losses.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, the Eisenhower administration's hand was stayed by a sense that perhaps a more friendly Cuban government might be in place twelve to fifteen months hence. This

was, as it turned out, a radical misreading of the local reality. But the Cubans, including apparently their embassy in Washington, were likewise guilty of self-deception: they thought Washington's reluctance to abolish the quota overnight *meant that the United States could not live without Cuban sugar*, thus encouraging Havana to become more unyielding on the subject of compensation for expropriated properties, and on other matters as well. Indeed, Castro had taken to claiming that the sugar quota, which assured a market for half of Cuba's crop and provided the country with two-thirds of its foreign exchange, was somehow a colonial burden from which he proposed to liberate his country.<sup>42</sup>

With respect to the sugar quota, then, the Eisenhower administration can hardly be accused of a lack of restraint. As late as April 1960, when the first shipment of Russian crude oil to the regime was already en route and envoys from Havana were in Moscow discussing military commitments, Washington was still reluctant to suspend it altogether; instead, it ordered the Agriculture Department to make its import allocations on an annual rather than quadrennial basis.<sup>43</sup> It pulled the Cuban quota only in July, when a Cuban-Soviet mutual security treaty was under active discussion in Havana and Moscow.

*Despite its distaste for unfolding events in Cuba, throughout 1959 the Eisenhower administration made serious efforts to crack down on exile overflights and other exile-based counterrevolutionary activities.* Almost immediately after Batista's fall, various right-wing military and civilian elements that had managed to escape to the United States began to operate against the island from bases in Florida. Typically, these involved anything from the airborne distribution of leaflets to the dropping of incendiary bombs on Cuban cane fields or sugar mills.

As early as October 1959, Rubottom warned Undersecretary Herter that unless "concerted effort is made to halt such activities . . . the impression will undoubtedly be gained in Cuba and other quarters that they have the tacit approval of the U.S. government."<sup>44</sup> The proper course of action, he added, was to encourage a "suitable opposition" within Cuba.<sup>45</sup>

Moreover, Rubottom explained, such activities were counterproductive from the point of view of U.S. policy. They were grist for Castro's propaganda mill; they encouraged

him in his efforts to obtain arms from the Soviet bloc; justified his posture before hemispheric opinion; tended to consolidate support for the regime at home; and endangered the lives of Americans resident in Cuba.<sup>46</sup>

There can be no doubt that serious efforts were made by the U.S. government to end these overflights. They were outlined in detail at a cabinet meeting on 25 March 1960.<sup>47</sup> At the same time, there was a genuine reluctance to become involved politically with the kinds of people who perpetrated them. For example, in June, Secretary Herter told President Eisenhower that Ambassador Pawley was working with a group of right-wing Cubans, including former Batista police officials. "The President asked Mr. Herter to call up Mr. Pawley and tell him to get out of this operation [*less than 1 line not declassified*]."<sup>48</sup>

*The State Department struggled as long as possible to insert the Castro revolution into the known taxonomy of Latin American nationalist regimes.* This was not always easy, because from almost the first days of the new Cuban government, Communists played a role wildly disproportionate to their domestic political following or their role in the overthrow of Batista. Moreover, as Ambassador Bonsal put it in July 1959, "of as much concern to the Embassy as avowed Communists are revolutionary leaders who, while denying they are Communists, follow a course which we believe favors Communist objectives and stimulates anti-Americanism."<sup>49</sup>

Nonetheless, Castro's rhetoric often simply restated the stock themes of Cuban nationalism, which after all much predated the existence of Communism on the island (and elsewhere). This encouraged efforts on the part of the State Department to compare the new Cuban government with others in recent Latin American history that, though initially brandishing the banner of anti-Americanism and nationalism, had moderated over time. As late as January 1960, Secretary Rubottom made reference to the Perón regime, which had been overthrown in Argentina five years before.<sup>50</sup> The following month, the Department's policy planning staff argued that, with luck, the United States might get something like the Bolivian revolution of 1952.<sup>51</sup> This line of analysis had concrete policy implications: if Castro was an "indigenous Latin American nationalist," the United States could afford to wait out the natural course of events. If, on the other hand, Cuba was (or

was becoming) part of the Soviet family of revolutions, immediate plans had to be made to neutralize or overthrow it.

By late March 1960, the Central Intelligence Agency was beginning to get a firmer conceptual grip on Castroism. A special National Intelligence Estimate the following month reported that

Fidel Castro remains the dominant element in the regime and we believe he is not disposed to accept actual direction from any foreign source. His susceptibility to Communist influence and suggestion, and his willing adoption of Communist patterns of action, spring from the parallelism of his revolutionary views with the current Communist line in Latin America, from his conviction that Communism offers no threat to his regime, and from his need for external support.<sup>52</sup>

While the Agency did not believe that Castro and his government were "demonstrably under the domination or control of the international Communist movement," both were likely to continue to accept Communist advice and pursue policies advantageous thereto. This was so less because of a devotion to Marxist ideology as such than because of a felt need to confront the United States. That in turn was pushing him

to look to the Bloc for support, including provision of military equipment, [and] should the Castro regime be threatened [by the United States], the USSR would probably do what it could to support it.

In other words, it was only quite late in the day that Washington stumbled on the fact that Castroism was something utterly *sui generis*—an authentic, indigenous Latin American revolution that for reasons of its own (size, weakness, proximity to the United States, economic vulnerability, culture, and mind-set) chose to align itself with the Soviet bloc. The same week the Agency produced this estimate, the 5412 Committee that oversaw covert operations began to plan what later became known as the Bay of Pigs operation.<sup>53</sup>

*There was considerable confusion, uncertainty, and ambivalence in Washington's assessment of the growing Soviet threat in Cuba.* This was wholly understandable, since in 1959 the Soviet Union's interests in the Latin American region were confined to a few trading companies and a score of local Communist parties, most of which were small and uninfluential (though not, as it happened, in Cuba). Soviet geostrategic doctrine had long

written off much of Latin America, and certainly the circum-Caribbean, to the historic U.S. sphere of influence—a practice that Premier Khrushchev later referred to pejoratively as “geographical fatalism.” His decision to reverse this policy, leading to the Cuban-Soviet alliance, was therefore wholly unpredictable.

From the beginning, the Eisenhower administration was uncertain whether the Soviet bloc might guarantee Castro’s survival by re-

up Castro for a knock-out and would regret very much being stampeded at this time.”<sup>57</sup> His voice dripping with sarcasm, Anderson went on to ask Rubottom

if in his opinion Castro is, indeed, in the process of falling on his face. He added that his guess is that time is completely on Castro’s side. If the U.S. lets Castro announce USSR support, will this not give him important strength both domestically and in the hemisphere?

The Treasury Secretary added that “should Castro do this it might rather aid us in making a good case with the rest of the countries of the hemisphere.”

Defense Secretary Thomas Gates asked Rubottom “what his reaction would be if Castro comes back from the USSR and announces a mutual security agreement or some form of agreement permitting Russian bases in Cuba.” Rubottom replied that the announcement of an upcoming visit to Cuba by Khrushchev and Castro’s (then current) visit to Moscow might well

tear the mask from Castro’s face and show him for the commie stooge that he is. If this clear communist course which Castro has set does not unite the hemisphere and the Cuban opposition, if we are not successful in our efforts to educate and persuade hemispheric opinion, then we may very probably have to do the job ourselves but at great cost.<sup>58</sup>

There was another reason why a Cuban-Soviet mutual security treaty might well serve U.S. purposes: while isolating Cuba from its neighbors and providing Washington with a powerful ideological weapon, it would probably be militarily worthless to Havana. That is, in the event of a showdown, Moscow was unlikely to come to Cuba’s aid. This was the view of Secretary Herter,<sup>59</sup> who added with remarkable sensitivity:

it is [my] feeling that the Soviets would not like to see a complete takeover of Cuba by the Communists, but desire rather to create the most possible devilment for the United States while leaving the burden on us to provide Communist domination.<sup>60</sup>

What Secretary Herter could not foresee was that the Soviets might opt for the more costly course, or be pushed into it by Castro himself. In retrospect, it appears that the optimal scenario for Moscow (Cuba as a cost-free irritant to the United States) was simply unattainable, given Cuba’s extreme geographic and economic vulnerability. The So-

## The possibility of an overt Cuban-Soviet military relationship was almost welcomed by Washington as a way of “defining” matters.

placing the United States as the principal market for Cuban sugar. This eventuality seems to have bothered it far less than the possibility of a Cuban-Soviet mutual security treaty, which would not only place a major Latin American country firmly in Moscow’s camp, but also shift the geopolitical balance in the region. On the other hand—here a major paradox—the possibility of an overt Cuban-Soviet military relationship was almost welcomed by Washington as a way of “defining” matters and presumably making it easier to force the Organization of American States to deal with Cuba on the basis of the Caracas resolution.<sup>54</sup>

The two issues—sugar and security—converged in a highly illuminating fashion at an inter-agency meeting on the Cuban question held at the State Department on 27 June 1960. When the subject of renewal of the sugar quota came up, Treasury Secretary Anderson argued against half-measures: “The time has come to say to the President that we should cut off all economic support to Cuba.”<sup>55</sup> Rubottom, representing the regionalist’s point of view, opposed dramatic actions (“tearing . . . up [trade treaties] as if they were scraps of paper”), which would not only undercut the Cuban opposition but many friends in Latin America as well.<sup>56</sup> When Anderson taunted Rubottom about taking Cuban abuse “lying down,” the latter responded that “the Department had worked for over a year to set

viets were, therefore, caught in a trap of their own making—either to abandon their new ally altogether, or take on the burden of subsidizing it indefinitely, as well as risk a military confrontation with the United States.

On 10 September 1960, the first shipments of Soviet arms arrived in Cuba. Two weeks later, CIA director Dulles told the National Security Council that “Cuba was now virtually a member of the Communist Bloc.” For his part, Secretary Dillon explained that the United States “was now beginning to implement certain actions with respect to Cuba and was clearing the deck for . . . certain other actions”<sup>61</sup>—that is, to prepare an exile force to invade the island and overthrow the Castro government.

*The argument between “letting Castro hang himself with his own rope” and applying economic sanctions became irrelevant throughout the course of 1960 as both policies proved ineffective.* From the very beginning, the State Department assumed a “soft” line with respect to dealing with the Cuban government, partly because of sensitivity to Latin American opinion, partly because it recognized that Castro continued to enjoy broad support within Cuba and that attacking him frontally would prove counterproductive. The most eloquent spokesman for this point of view was Ambassador Bonsal himself, who repeatedly argued that it was vitally important that “if the revolution fails it should be for exclusively Cuban reasons.”<sup>62</sup>

In practice, this policy proved extremely difficult to pursue because the Cuban government itself persisted in provocative actions whose evident purpose was to goad the United States into retaliatory action. Bonsal’s self-effacing personal style and the Eisenhower administration’s determination not to be stampeded by Congress, the press, or others into precipitous cancellation of the sugar quota only encouraged Castro and Guevara to go further. At the same time, U.S. patience and restraint discouraged and demoralized the growing domestic opposition on the island, upon which Washington was eventually counting to improve the situation on the ground. Rubottom put it this way:

We have to walk a tightrope—while trying to keep up a semblance of good relations with the present regime we must, at the same time, try to keep alive any spark of opposition and to let the opposition know we are aware of its existence and not committed to Castro.<sup>63</sup>

Economic pressures on the Castro regime, begun in March 1960 and culminating with the suspension of the sugar quota in July, did not seriously shake its hold on power. Indeed, from a political point of view, such actions probably worked to Castro’s favor. As Rubottom put it in a letter to Secretary Herter:

We must remember that a Cuban thrown out of a job because of U.S. reprisals is likely to become anti-U.S. and pro-Castro while one out of work because of Castro’s own mistakes is likely to become anti-Castro and pro-U.S.<sup>64</sup>

In other words, the United States could not fail to react in some way to Cuban confiscation of American property for fear of encouraging similar actions elsewhere in the hemisphere (and the world). But neither could it punish the Cuban government without undermining its (Washington’s) larger political agenda on the island, which was to encourage acceptable anti-Castro elements to replace the new regime. It was the Soviet Union that stepped in to break this vicious circle, by agreeing both to replace the United States as the principal market for Cuban sugar, and to sell arms to Castro. Moscow thus singlehandedly imposed an entirely new logic to U.S. policy, placing Cuba within the larger framework of cold war priorities. This, in turn, finally made it possible for Washington to cleanly define its paramount interests on the island, and sacrifice other, more traditional economic, political, and regional considerations.

## CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Insofar as these documents shed any light on the current U.S.-Cuban imbroglio, they depict from the very start two planets set in utterly different solar systems. One official at the Policy Planning Staff, speaking of the Castro regime, put it this way: “We have never in our national history experienced anything quite like it in the magnitudes of anti-US venom, claims for expropriation, or Soviet threats to the hemisphere. . . . I think we fail to realize that Castro does not speak our language and does not want to listen to it.”<sup>65</sup> For his part, President Eisenhower confided to the National Security Council that “it was difficult to figure out what Castro was trying to do . . . nothing seemed to have an effect on” him.<sup>66</sup>

For the United States, the Cuban revolution was both unexpected and incomprehen-

ble. The Castro regime bore little or no resemblance to anything it had yet seen in Latin America. If it were merely nationalist-populist rather than Communist, why did it not respond to the kinds of initiatives that had been successful with such governments elsewhere in the region? Barring a transformation to totalitarian dictatorship, how did it propose to make its bizarre economic measures work? And if it was a regime of Communist inspiration, when would it finally declare its true colors?

There was, of course, no "bourgeois" logic to Castro's revolution. Cuba's welfare had long been linked to the United States, and could not be separated from it without paying a ruinous price. When President Eisenhower asked Ambassador Bonsal how Cuba "could make a living if it was unable to sell its sugar," the latter replied that "the present government had not thought that problem out."<sup>67</sup> This was true as far as it went, but fell far short of the political imagination required. In effect, Washington failed to go beyond the calculations of double-entry book-keeping; to grasp that what for it was sheer madness represented for many Cubans a long-awaited, orgasmic release. Or that Castro would succeed in fashioning a political system capable of repressing whatever second thoughts his fellow-countrymen might have by the time they got around to having them.

Most of all, the Eisenhower administration took no note of the long- and even middle-term political implications of a massive migration of Cuban professionals and members of the middle class that began sometime in mid-1959 and greatly accelerated throughout 1960. In effect, with each day there were fewer people in the country of the type that Washington expected to lead a post-Castro government, and fewer potential members of its constituency. It was not even certain what could or would replace Castro in the happy eventuality of his disappearance. "There is not a clear enough realization among our own people," the official at the Policy Planning Staff wrote, "that pre-Castro Cuba will not return, or that, if we are to reestablish influence within Cuba, it must be in a context different from that which obtained in the past."<sup>68</sup> In many ways, this problem persists thirty-five years later.

For its part, from the very beginning, the Castro regime went off in directions that had little or nothing to do with the United States.

Indeed, one is struck in these documents by the degree to which U.S. policy was basically irrelevant to the course of revolutionary events. At no point did the new regime even deign to engage the Eisenhower administration on the major issues of the bilateral relationship. Ambassador Bonsal—who urged upon Washington a policy of patience and restraint almost to his last day on the island—was shunted aside and repeatedly refused appointments with Castro, the foreign minister, or other high officials. When he managed to see these personalities, they invariably lied to him or offered disingenuous responses to his appeals.<sup>69</sup>

There were important contradictions within the U.S. business community in Cuba, and between it and the government in Washington, but the Cuban government took no note of these and made no effort whatever to exploit them to its own advantage. This was so because there was no apparent Cuban design of coexistence with the United States in any form, merely a desire to punish, to humiliate, to confront—a posture that caused all elements of the American side to eventually close ranks and advocate a full-dress economic and political embargo.

With the best will in the world, then, it is difficult to see what policy would have purchased a good relationship with Castro's Cuba, since such a relationship was never even offered as a theoretical object for sale. The regime defined itself (and, indeed, the very Cuban nationality) entirely in terms of its opposition to the United States and all its works. The decision of the Soviet Union to subsidize the Cuban economy made this posture easier to assume and sustained it over three decades, but one cannot be certain that it would not have survived even so—a point now being brought home by events since 1989. Cuba seems to have proven that a small country living in the shadow of the United States can purposely pick a fight with it and live to tell the tale; but how much beyond that still remains to be seen.

#### NOTES

1. John P. Glennon, Editor-in-Chief, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958-60: Cuba* (Washington, D. C.: GPO, 1991).
2. Doc. 11, 20.
3. Doc. 38, 62.
4. Doc. 33, 56.
5. Doc. 111, 166.
6. Doc. 112, 170, 172.

7. Doc. 117, 188.
8. Doc. 123, 196.
9. Doc. 133, 215.
10. Doc. 154, 253–54.
11. Doc. 158, 260.
12. Doc. 263, 270.
13. Ambassador Smith eventually learned of the mission from Cuban sources.
14. Doc. 201, 328.
15. Doc. 25, 47. Castro issued a similar denial to U.S. Consul Wollam in Santiago in July, Doc. 81, 128.
16. Doc. 18, 34.
17. Doc. 47, 77.
18. Doc. 135, 216. The same analyst added that it "would indeed be serious if our Government assumed that the movement was not Communist and later proved to be so," but, he added, the inverse was also true.
19. Doc. 188, 302.
20. Doc. 188, 303.
21. Doc. 203, 331.
22. Doc. 154, 253.
23. Doc. 46, 75.
24. Editorial note, 12.
25. Doc. 254, 406.
26. As I&R pointed out in mid-January, "if we had received additional information over the last six months on the amount of military equipment Castro was receiving from the US, we might have had a somewhat different appreciation of his strength." Doc. 226, 363.
27. Doc. 248, 395.
28. Doc. 266, 442.
29. Doc. 269, 446.
30. Doc. 269, *supra*; Doc. 271, 449.
31. Doc. 287 (Editorial Note), 478. For the full text see Jeffrey J. Safford, "The Nixon-Castro Meeting of 19 April 1959," *Diplomatic History*, 4 (1980): 425–431.
32. Doc. 288, 477.
33. Rufo López Fresquet, *My Fourteen Months with Castro* (Cleveland and New York: World Publishing Company, 1966), 100–12. López Fresquet was minister of the treasury from 8 January 1959 to 17 March 1960.
34. Doc. 274, 454.
35. Doc. 279, 467.
36. Doc. 302, 504.
37. Interview with Castro in Lee Lockwood, *Castro's Cuba, Cuba's Fidel* (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), 159–60. See also the erroneous version of López Fresquet, 171.
38. Doc. 311, 515–16.
39. Doc. 412, 709–11.
40. Doc. 536, 959–60.
41. Doc. 406, 693–96.
42. Doc. 310, 512–15, which summarizes a remarkable conversation in this regard between Cuban Ambassador Ernesto Dihigo and Assistant Secretary Roy Rubottom. After the quota was finally abolished, Foreign Minister Raul Roa's sister-in-law confided to Ambassador Bonsal that such action was "anticipated and desired by Castro"; the fact that "it cut deep . . . meant he could charge economic aggression all the more effectively." Doc. 548, 995.
43. Doc. 501, 887–89.
44. Doc. 375, 633.
45. Doc. 376, 638.
46. Doc. 462, 808–09.
47. Doc. 493, 874.
48. Doc. 529, 945.
49. Doc. 330, 554.
50. Doc. 419, 733.
51. Doc. 458, 796.
52. Doc. 491, 870.
53. Doc. 481, 850–51.
54. This was the consensus reached (under heavy U.S. pressure) by the OAS foreign ministers at their 1954 meeting in the Venezuelan capital, by which countries that opted for alliances with extra-hemispheric powers were subject to collective sanctions. It provided a sort of juridical umbrella under which the United States intervened to depose the Arbenz regime in Guatemala, which was in the process of acquiring arms from the Eastern bloc.
55. Doc. 536, 960.
56. *Ibid.*, 961.
57. *Ibid.*, 962.
58. *Ibid.*, 962.
59. Reflected also in a Special NIE prepared by the CIA (22 March 1960). See Doc. 491, 871.
60. *Ibid.*, 965.
61. Doc. 583, 1074–75.
62. Doc. 362, 604.
63. Doc. 365, 620.
64. Doc. 473, 832.
65. Doc. 458, 795–96.
66. Doc. 474, 833.
67. Doc. 436, 764–65.
68. Doc. 458, *loc. cit.*
69. Doc. 342, 570. Foreign Minister Raúl Roa told Bonsal on 23 July 1959 that "he personally was strongly opposed to Communism and that he believed there were no Communists in important government positions."