



Cuba

Last June, the United States and Cuba began the process of restoring formal diplomatic relations. Already American diplomats have been stationed in Havana, and Cuban diplomats in Washington. Such tentative steps toward "normalization" follow almost two decades of Cold War hostility. Washington still sees some outstanding issues: compensation for \$1.8 billion in nationalized American property; Cuba's ambitious nuclear power program; its widespread military intervention in Africa; and the fact that Fidel Castro has kept more political prisoners in jail for a longer time than any other Latin strongman. Yet Castro's attempts to export his revolution to the rest of Latin America have failed. Cuba remains a one-party Communist state and a Soviet ally, but it has a history and character of its own. Here, historians Martin Sherwin and Peter Winn review past Cuban-American relations, while political scientist Richard R. Fagen examines Cuba's special dependence on the Soviet Union.



THE U.S. AND CUBA

by Martin J. Sherwin and Peter Winn

"There are laws of political as well as of physical gravitation," John Quincy Adams observed in 1823, drawing an analogy between the fate of an apple severed from a tree and the destiny of a beautiful island 90 miles off the coast of the newly acquired territory of Florida: "Forcibly disjoined from its own unnatural connection with Spain and incapable of self-support, [Cuba] can gravitate only toward the North American Union,

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which, by the same law of nature, cannot cast her off from its bosom."

One hundred and thirty-five years later, however, something "unnatural" happened to Cuba, and for almost 20 years Americans have been trying to figure out what went wrong. How did an island liberated in 1898 by our army and adopted by our navy—a country so freighted with our economic interests and political influence that it could be described as "no more independent than Long Island"—defy the laws of gravity? Were our perceptions of Cuba mistaken?

The search for useful answers must begin with a hard look at the cultural, geographic, and economic assumptions that have guided American diplomacy since our Founding Fathers conceived of the "American system," a sphere-of-influence concept that envisioned a U.S.-dominated Hemisphere.

Manifest Destiny

Culturally, the United States is Anglo-Protestant and northern European, a society of immigrants at odds with the ethos of the Latin world. Our citizens may turn south for trade or relaxation, but for models and for measures of success they look across the North Atlantic. The good opinion of Latin Americans does not weigh heavily on them: Imitation is encouraged, envy expected, and disapproval permitted, but activities that conflict with the interests of the United States are not suffered gladly.

This attitude, which Abraham Lowenthal has termed our "hegemonic presumption,"* has guided U.S.-Latin American policy since the 19th century, when Manifest Destiny spread the fever of expansionism across the North American continent. Distinctions between our conquest of half of Mexico in 1848 and our acquisition of Cuba from Spain 50 years later are real, but they

*Abraham Lowenthal, "The United States and Latin America: Ending the Hegemonic Pre-
sumption," *Foreign Affairs*, Oct. 1976.

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Largest and most westerly of the Caribbean Islands, Cuba is 745 miles long and has a total area of 44,218 square miles (roughly the size of Louisiana). It lies only 90 miles from Key West and 48 miles from Haiti, and is strategically placed to command the sea approaches to the Panama Canal. Discovered by Columbus in 1492, Cuba was colonized by Spain in 1511. The island is fertile and enjoys a moderate and stable climate, which is ideal for sugarcane cultivation. There are significant deposits of nickel, iron, copper, chrome, manganese, and tungsten, but no oil.

are far less important than the underlying assumption that binds them to the Platt Amendment of 1901 and the Bay of Pigs: that the United States has the power, the right, and indeed the responsibility to define the economic and political order throughout the Hemisphere.

A Tranquil Caribbean

Geography, too, has helped mold American perceptions of Cuba, from the earliest days of the Republic through the present, when space age technology calls into question the importance of proximity in great power strategy. Poised at the gateway to the Caribbean, guarding the isthmian route to the

Pacific, only 48 miles from Key West, Cuba has been viewed by Presidents from Jefferson to Nixon as an island whose destiny the United States must control. Even the 1823 Monroe Doctrine, as historian Ronald Steel noted in *Pax Americana* (1976), was essentially a Caribbean doctrine that affirmed the "vital interest" of the United States "in the tranquility of what it considered to be its inland sea."

American businessmen had reasons of their own for promoting a U.S. pre-eminence in Cuba. Even before the Spanish-American War, they had established a beachhead on the island. By 1897, exports to Cuba had reached \$27 million and investments almost twice that amount. After the island came under U.S. protection in 1898, the dollar followed the flag, a condition which Cuba's first U.S.-appointed governor-general, Leonard Wood, equated with political stability. When "people ask me what we mean by a stable government in Cuba," Wood wrote to Secretary of War Elihu Root in 1900, "I tell them that when money can be borrowed at a reasonable rate of interest and when capital is willing to invest in the Island, a condition of stability will have been reached."*

In the years that followed, United States economic interests achieved virtual control of the Cuban economy. American investments rose to \$1.2 billion in 1924, a year in which tiny Cuba was our fourth largest customer, buying 66 percent of its imports from the United States and sending us 83 percent of its exports (mostly sugar) in exchange. By 1928, Americans controlled three-quarters of Cuban sugar production, and "King Sugar," accounting for nearly 90 percent of Cuban exports, ruled the island's economy.

"Our Cuban Colony"

During the succeeding decades, American sugar holdings declined, reflecting the unstable fortunes of Cuba's bittersweet crop. Nevertheless, in 1956 Americans directly controlled 40 percent of Cuba's sugar production and consumed half of its sugar exports. The island still depended upon the United States for capital, technology, and tourism, as well as manufactures and markets. The development of Cuban industry had been impeded by treaty and restrictive U.S. legislation; Congress set the all-important Cuban sugar quota, and American investments accounted for 85 percent of all foreign investments on the

* Quoted in David F. Healy, *The United States in Cuba, 1898-1902*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1963), p. 133.

island.* Economically, on the eve of Castro's Revolution, the island was still "our Cuban colony", and politically, the United States ambassador, by his own testimony, was "the second most important man in Cuba; sometimes even more important than the [Cuban] president."†

Despite the cultural biases, national security concerns, and economic interests that shaped U.S. policies toward Cuba, a minority of Americans sought to balance our interests against the legitimate aspirations of the Cuban people, although with limited success. In 1898, they persuaded Congress to accept the Teller Amendment, forbidding outright annexation of the island, only to see this measure neutralized in 1901 with the passage of the Platt Amendment, asserting the right of the United States to intervene in Cuba's internal affairs.

Background to Revolution

Three military interventions and an equal number of American proconsuls punctuated Cuba's history between 1901 and 1934, when President Franklin Roosevelt renounced the Platt Amendment.‡ Other forms of U.S. intervention, however, proved more benign. During the American occupation of 1899–1902, army doctors under Walter Reed virtually banished yellow fever from the island. Cuban finances were reorganized, trade boomed, and the Catholic Church was separated from the operations of the government.

But while the American enterprise afforded Cuba a significant measure of prosperity, the island's new affluence was unevenly distributed and dependent upon the volatile world sugar market. In the end, the Depression and the Machado dictatorship (1924–33) brought economic crisis and political unrest—and Sumner Welles as President Roosevelt's emissary—to Cuba in 1933. Rejecting Machado's successor as too radical, Welles or-

*The Reciprocal Trade Agreement of 1934 barred import quotas or protective tariffs on a wide range of American manufactures and flooded the Cuban market with goods at prices with which local industries could not compete. Together with the Jones-Costigan Act of the same year, which established a generous quota for Cuban refined sugar, the trade treaty constituted what Earl Babst of the American Sugar Refining Company called "a step in the direction of a sound Colonial Policy."

†Earl Smith, in *Communist Threat to the United States Through the Caribbean*, Hearings before the Subcommittee of the Senate Judiciary Committee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act, Aug. 30, 1960, pt. 9, p. 700.

‡Between 1898 and 1920, the United States landed troops 20 times on the soil of foreign nations. Three of these interventions involved Cuba, although the Platt Amendment was invoked as justification only in 1906. In addition, the tutelary missions of Charles Magoon (1907–09), Enoch Crowder (1920–22), and Sumner Welles (1933) represented active American political interference in Cuba's internal affairs.

cheestrated negotiations in Cuba and decisions in Washington that led to the ouster of the reform-minded Ramon Grau San Martin in January 1934. Taking the hint, Cuban Army strongman Colonel Fulgencio Batista threw his support to Cuba's pro-American conservatives and reaped 25 years of power as a reward.

Batista brought tranquillity to Cuba, but through co-optation and coercion rather than reform. Strikes were broken, labor unions disciplined, and constitutional guarantees honored in the breach. Private property and foreign investment, however, were protected. Although a well-intentioned Foreign Policy Association study of 1935 focused sympathetically on the *Problems of the New Cuba*, in the eyes of most American policymakers and businessmen, the Cuban situation had been favorably resolved. By the 1950's, movies and tourism had replaced the old image of "our Cuban colony" with a new vision of "the enchanted island."

The Unseen Cuba

For most of its 6 million people, however, Batista's Cuba was a land of poverty, unemployment, sugar monoculture, and social injustice. Its politics were corrupt and repressive, and its relatively high levels of per capita income and social services were distributed unevenly. A 1951 World Bank report underscored these problems* and a few scholars and journalists denounced Batista's frustration of democracy and denial of human rights, but this was a Cuba that most Americans neither saw nor wished to see.

The New Deal had responded to the growth of anti-Americanism south of the border with the Good Neighbor Policy, but viewed from Havana, benevolent changes in U.S. policy between 1898 and 1958 were more show than substance. With its emphasis on political stability and economic order, the clear priority of American policy in Cuba remained the protection of American interests—a commitment that placed the United States in opposition to fundamental reform. For six decades, this policy appeared to be relatively successful, while acute economic, social,

*International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, *Report on Cuba*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1951. This study found ample unused human and material resources available in Cuba and urged that the country take advantage of the current prosperity to diversify her economy, which concentration on sugar had prevented at a social cost of 25 percent unemployment, even in "normal" times. The report also recognized the social and political obstacles to economic growth, stressing in particular a malaise among the Cuban people, reflecting a lack of faith in the integrity of government and business and labor leaders, and doubts concerning the impartiality and consistency of law enforcement.

CUBAN DOMESTIC EVENTS

- 1952** *March* Colonel Fulgencio Batista ousts President Carlos Prío Socarrás in a military coup.
- 1953** *July* Rebels led by Fidel Castro attack Moncado Barracks in Santiago de Cuba; about 100 students and soldiers killed.
- 1956** *November* Revolutionary uprising led by Castro begins in Oriente Province.
- 1959** *January* Batista resigns and flees to Dominican Republic. *February* Castro sworn in as premier of Cuba. *May* Agrarian Reform Bill effectively confiscates U.S. sugar holdings.
- 1960** *May* Pro-government unions seize major newspapers critical of Castro regime.
- 1961** *May* In a May Day speech, Castro proclaims Cuba a socialist state. *June* Cuba nationalizes education.
- 1963** *October* Most privately owned farms are nationalized.
- 1964** *August* Cuba cuts back on foreign buying because of deteriorating economy.
- 1966** *January* Government cuts rice ration by 50 percent.
- 1969** *May* Bread rationing goes into effect in Havana; Castro calls for record 10 million-ton sugar harvest in 1970.
- 1970** *July* Castro publicly acknowledges economic problems. *December* Castro announces failure to meet 10 million-ton sugar goal.
- 1972** *February* Government announces 35 percent reduction in domestic sugar ration; Cuban dependence on Soviet aid reaches \$750 million annually.
- 1973** *January* Government cuts daily beef ration by 20 percent.
- 1974** *June* Delegates to municipal assemblies are elected in first provincial elections in 15 years.
- 1975** *June* Cuba announces a trade surplus of \$500 million for 1974. *December* First Cuban Five-Year Plan calls for 6 percent annual growth rate; planners emphasize profitability and decentralized decision-making; Cuban Congress approves Constitution affirming Cuban socialism and calling for Cuban trade and diplomatic relations with all countries.
- 1976** *February* Popular referendum approves new Constitution.

and political problems festered. In the end, the failure to carry out reforms from above led to revolution from below—a revolution with a distinctly anti-American cast.

Revolution and Confrontation

The initial American image of Fidel Castro was shaped by veteran *New York Times* correspondent Herbert Matthews in a series of articles in early 1957. Matthews had traced Castro and his guerrillas to the rugged Sierra Maestra in eastern Cuba, and his articles described the Cuban leader as an idealistic reformer intent on restoring the democratic Cuban Constitution of 1940. While some of his followers were probably Communists—including his brother Raul and Ernesto “Ché” Guevara—Castro himself, said Matthews, was not. He concluded that the guerrilla leader’s policies were likely to be conditioned by the way the United States treated him.

During 1958, as reports of guerrilla success and government repression surfaced in the American press, Washington’s support for Batista began to cool. The State Department, however, still sought a “safe” alternative, pinning its hopes first upon a Batista general, Eulogio Cantillo, and then, after the rebel victory, on the restraining influence of more moderate members of Castro’s political coalition, but with the flight of Batista and his closest collaborators to the Dominican Republic on the last day of 1958, power effectively devolved on Fidel Castro.

Although the United States recognized the new Cuban government, the underlying tensions between Washington and Havana surfaced early in 1959 when the Revolution took a radical road. The trial and execution of some 500 Batista military and police officers accused of “war crimes” (involving the deaths of an estimated 20,000 Cubans during the preceding decade) were widely criticized in Congress and the American media. The new land reform and utilities regulation measures were formally protested as prejudicial to American interests.

Increasingly, allegations of communist influence appeared in the U.S. press, and Matthew’s romantic image of Fidel Castro yielded to something more menacing. “The Revolution may be like a watermelon,” suggested the *Wall Street Journal* on June 24, 1959. “The more they slice it, the redder it gets.” These were but the first in a series of salvos fired across the Caribbean whose cumulative effect was to reverse the force of geopolitical gravity and send John Quincy Adams’ Cuban apple spinning off into the Soviet orbit.

In the months that followed, the United States embargoed

trade with Cuba, recalled its ambassador, and secretly began training an exile invasion force, while Cuba nationalized American property, re-oriented its economy toward the Soviet Union, and moved toward declaring itself the Hemisphere's first socialist state. In the face of a revolution whose character and ideology had disappointed their expectations, the exodus of half a million Cubans began, many of whom found a home in Miami and support for their cause in Washington. By the close of 1960, the United States and Cuba were trading accusations and steering a collision course.

Although the United States response to the Cuban Revolution was influenced by the assumptions and politics of the Cold War, the intense emotion that it aroused in America revealed still deeper roots. The U.S. reaction also reflected a sense of failure and betrayal, as well as an awareness of the threat to our self-image and Caribbean hegemony that the success of Castro's Revolution represented. Americans may have differed about who was to blame, but they shared the rage of Prospero at the treachery of a Cuban Caliban.

At bottom, however, the anti-American course of the Cuban Revolution was the result neither of American error nor Cuban perfidy but of a fundamental conflict between our hegemonic presumption and Fidel Castro's commitment to the structural transformation of Cuba and its international relations. The United States would itself take up the banners of land reform, industrial development, and social justice during the years of President John F. Kennedy's Alliance for Progress. Castro's pursuit of these goals in Cuba in 1959, however, clashed with powerful American interests, as did his determination to lessen Cuba's dependence upon the United States. Either Castro would have to compromise his vision of a New Cuba, as his nation's leaders had always done in the past, or a showdown with Washington was all but inevitable.

Surrogate Invaders

While politicians and pundits debated whether Fidel Castro was a Communist and how Cuba's leap into the arms of the Russian bear could have been averted, successive U.S. administrations moved to deal with the new "red threat to the Hemisphere," as they had dealt with its Guatemalan predecessor in 1954—by sponsoring an invasion of exiles.

If the hegemonic presumption composed one part of the equation that added up to the 1961 invasion at the Bay of Pigs, the other was the projection onto Cubans of American values:

Castro was a Communist and a dictator; therefore the Cuban people would rebel against him, granted the opportunity. On the sands of *Playa Giron*, this presumption was revealed to be anachronistic and this projection ethnocentric. But the assumptions that shaped the invasion of Cuba were too deeply rooted for even the debacle of the Bay of Pigs to alter.

President Kennedy took responsibility for a misconceived strategy, but he continued to regard the new Cuba as a threat to the hemispheric system, a menace underscored by Castro's undisguised support for leftist guerrilla movements and the appearance of Russian vessels in Cuban ports. In Washington's eyes, the existence of a "red peril" only 90 miles from Miami justified a covert intervention that included economic sabotage, commando raids, and attempts to assassinate Castro. It required the recruitment and training of a clandestine force of Cuban exiles—a force that entered history at the Bay of Pigs and came home to roost at the Watergate.

Ironically, the potential Cuban threat to national—and hemispheric—security may have been largely a self-fulfilling American prophecy. The covert United States intervention in Cuba and open blockade of the island convinced Castro that another, more dangerous American invasion was in the offing and, by his own account, led the Cuban government to request the secret installation of Russian medium-range missiles on the island.

Sheathing the Dagger

Although the "missiles of October" (1962) had little effect upon the strategic balance of terror, their presence gave concrete shape to the deep-seated American fear of Cuba, "an island pointing like a dagger at the soft-underbelly of the nation." In the face of this concern, other considerations became secondary; the United States agreed not to invade Cuba in return for removal of the offending missiles.

Thereafter, American policy concentrated upon the containment of the Cuban Revolution, pressing for the island's ouster from hemispheric political and economic systems and training the Latin American military to prevent its repetition elsewhere. This priority of "no more Cubas" was to shape the Latin American policy of the United States for a decade—from Kennedy's Alliance for Progress to Kissinger's New Dialogue—and lead us to support first reform and then military dictatorships in half the continent, to send marines into the Dominican Republic (1965), and to intervene covertly in Chile (1970–73). As

President Lyndon Johnson remarked in justification of his massive Dominican intervention: "We don't propose to sit here in our rocking chair with our hands folded and let the Communists set up any government in the Western Hemisphere."

The New Cuba's Many Faces

The missile crisis, the most menacing event of the Cold War, froze a chilling image of Cuba for most Americans. Cuba was now a Russian satellite and America's enemy. It was a land of Spartan socialism, communist dictatorship, and regimented masses. Gone was the old image of Latin sensuality and spontaneity, of rum and rhumba.

Within this framework of general hostility, contradictory views of the "New Cuba" persisted. Some observers saw Castro as a Soviet satrap, replicating the structures and strictures of a neo-Stalinist state, responsive to the will and whim of the Kremlin.* Others regarded the Cuban leader as unpredictably autonomous, a revolutionary Latin tail wagging the conservative Russian bear, a financial drain on Soviet gold and a competitor for Third World leadership.†

Only a minority of Americans viewed the Cuban Revolution with more favorable eyes, stressing its concern for social and economic equity. To them, Fidel Castro was a popular and charismatic leader, not a totalitarian tyrant, and his rule reflected both independence and innovation.‡ Whatever the merits of these various views, it was not until the mid-1970's that the prevailing American image of Cuba began to change, and with that change came a thaw in U.S.-Cuban relations.

On the Cuban side, the high costs of the symbolic 1970 sugar harvest and the failure of revolutionary movements elsewhere in Latin America led to a new pragmatism in economic and foreign policy and to a new stress on citizen participation in building

* See, for example, K. S. Karol, *Guerrillas in Power*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1970, and Irving L. Horowitz, "The Political Sociology of Cuban Communism," in Carmelo Mesa-Lago, ed., *Revolutionary Change in Cuba*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1972.

† See, Theodore Draper, *Castroism, Theory and Practice*, New York: Praeger, 1965; Andres Suarez, *Cuba: Castroism and Communism, 1959-66*, Cambridge, M.I.T. Press, 1967; D. Bruce Johnson, *Castro, the Kremlin and Communism in Latin America*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1969.

‡ This group and its publications include Lee Lockwood, *Castro's Cuba, Cuba's Fidel*, New York: Macmillan, 1967; Jose Yglesias, *In the Fist of the Revolution*, New York: Pantheon, 1968; Richard Fagen, *The Transformation of Political Culture in Cuba*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969; and Marvin Leiner, *Children Are the Revolution*, New York: Viking, 1974.

socialism. On the American side, détente with Russia and China and peace in Vietnam made continued confrontation with Cuba an anomaly, while Castro's success in building diplomatic bridges to other Latin countries and eroding the U.S. economic blockade made a new Cuba policy advisable. Moreover, as the Communist monolith fractured into competing socialisms, pursuing distinct ideological paths and diverse national interests, the United States began to perceive opportunities to be seized where it had previously seen only enemies to be combatted.

Although Richard Nixon's personal hostility to Castro's Cuba (which he likened to one half of "a red sandwich," the other half being Chile several thousand miles away) prevented him from extending détente to the enemy off Key Biscayne, his successor, Gerald Ford, began the process of improving relations. Ironically, Nixon, with his trip to Peking, paved the way for President Jimmy Carter's inclusion of Cuba—along with China—among those areas of the world in which the United States should "aggressively challenge . . . the Soviet Union and others for influence." Détente may not have begun close to home, but the logic of détente eventually found its way back to the Caribbean.

Recently, American interest in Castro's Revolution has increased. Scholars and journalists, congressmen and businessmen have gone to Cuba and returned with more balanced impressions. Though it remains a country with economic problems, political restrictions, and Russian ties, it is also a land of rich resources, social reforms, and Latin culture. Moreover, in Fidel Castro Cuba has a popular and pragmatic leader who is ready for a rapprochement with the United States. Significantly, a Gallup poll taken last spring showed that a majority of Americans now favor negotiating our differences with Cuba and restoring diplomatic ties with Havana.*

As the Carter Administration takes steps to achieve both these goals, one phase in the long history of U.S.-Cuban relations draws to a close and a new one, with an opportunity to transcend the myths and mutual misperceptions of the past, begins. "The difficulty," Lord Keynes observed, "lies not in the new ideas, but in escaping from the old ones."

* By a margin of more than 2 to 1 (59 percent to 25 percent), this poll showed that Americans are either "very strongly" or "fairly strongly" in favor of entering into negotiations (16 percent "didn't know"). Public opinion, which had been firmly opposed to normalization of relations with Cuba in early 1971 (Harris survey: 21 percent in favor, 61 percent opposed, 18 percent didn't know) began to shift after President Nixon's trip to China in 1972. See William Watts and Jorge I. Domínguez, *The United States and Cuba: Old Issues and New Directions*, Washington: Potomac Associates, 1977.