

WASHINGTON AND HAVANA

by *Pamela S. Falk*

President Dwight D. Eisenhower had been in office six months. The Senate had almost completed the confirmation of his first cabinet appointees, among them Secretary of State John Foster Dulles. Like Ike and the vice president, Richard M. Nixon, Dulles thought inadequate the Truman policy of "containment" of Soviet expansion. One indication, he had told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, was that communism was a "rising menace in South America."

But few Washington officials took notice of an event that occurred just about then, on July 26, 1953, closer to home, in Cuba.

Following a sugar-harvest festival, about 130 armed rebels, most wearing army uniforms, squeezed into cars to drive into Santiago, Cuba's second city. At 5:15 A.M., they attacked several targets, including the Moncada barracks of President Fulgencio Batista's army. Militarily, the raid was a fiasco. Some raiders got lost; perhaps 80 were taken prisoner. Yet, the raid was a political success. Panicky troops killed nearly 70 of the captured rebels. Then came a wave of repression—and protests from middle-class Cubans and foreign critics of Batista.

The captured leader of the Moncada raid, an obscure Havana University law graduate named Fidel Castro, was able to play both martyr and hero. At his trial, sentenced to 15 years in prison, he concluded a two-hour oration with the vow that "history will absolve me."

In fact, Castro was absolved by Batista, who two years later declared an amnesty for the jailed Moncada rebels. Then Batista's foes enjoyed another stroke of luck. In March 1958, responding to U.S. critics of human rights abuses in Cuba, the Eisenhower administration stopped the shipment of arms to Batista. By then, Castro had returned from self-exile in Mexico with a small band of guerrillas on the motor yacht *Granma* to lead his "26th of July Movement."

Thus began a revolution that would tear Cuba away from a long, unhappy relationship with its neighbor across the Straits of Florida.

So close at hand, Cuba had fascinated U.S. officials for more than a century. In 1823, before he became the sixth president, John Quincy Adams observed that the island's connection with distant Spain was "unnatural," and that it was also "incapable of self-support." Someday, he thought, Cuba would "gravitate" toward the "North American Union, which, by the same law of nature, cannot cast her off from its bosom." Over the decades, four presidents—Polk, Buchanan, Grant, and McKinley—tried to buy the island from Spain, and some enterprising Cubans promoted U.S. annexation. Indeed, Cuba's flag (white star on red trian-

After talking with Castro for three hours in Washington in April 1959, Vice President Richard M. Nixon wrote that "his ideas as to how to run a government or an economy are less developed than those of almost any world figure I have met in 50 countries." The Cuban leader did make one thing clear, however. Repeatedly during his U.S. visit, he insisted that "we are not Communists."



gle, blue and white bars), adopted after Cuba came under U.S. occupation following the 1898 Spanish-American War, was originally designed by an anti-Spanish rebel to suggest a Cuban aspiration to join the Union.

During the 1950s, many, if not most, Cubans were prospering thanks to the *Yanqui* connection—sugar quotas, investment, and tourism. Cuba's annual income per capita, \$400 in early 1957, was among the highest in Latin America. Cubans had more television sets than any other Latins, more telephones than all but the Argentines and Uruguayans, more cars than anyone but the Venezuelans, and nearly twice as many doctors as the Mexicans. Havana had slums, but also 18 daily newspapers, 32 radio stations, and five TV centers. The broad Malecón avenue skirting the coast linked Old Havana to the new center of town, Vedado. There, the old Hotel Nacional was joined by several newcomers. Nearby, in Miramar and El Country Club, were big homes, yacht clubs, and the Tropicana, the "largest night club in the world."

But Cuba's prosperity was as unevenly distributed as it was dependent on U.S. dollars. And, as a legacy from more than 300 years of colonial rule, the island had weak institutions. Plagued by corruption and civil violence, it was a mobster's haven. Rival Cuban gangs and politicians were as much to blame as the much-publicized American hoodlum-in-residence, Meyer Lansky. Student elections at the radicalized University of Havana were settled by fistfights, firearms, and kidnappings. Indeed, it

was to stop such chronic ills that Fulgencio Batista and some other noncommissioned army officers had first seized power in 1933.

Castro was no peasant rebel. His father was a Spanish immigrant who rose from railway worker for the United Fruit Company to landowner in Oriente, Cuba's easternmost province, with 500 field hands. A graduate of the University of Havana political wars, Fidel had an "explosive nature," as his brother Raúl said. But he led just one of many groups opposing the now-reviled Batista. Few Americans knew much about him. As he noted in his memoirs, Eisenhower was surprised that it was Castro who emerged after Batista left Cuba on January 1, 1959, "to avoid more bloodshed." *Life* welcomed him as a "soldier-scholar" who had toppled an "oppressive, corrupt, and commercially astute" regime.

An 'Educated Fanatic'

For most of his two-year struggle, Castro was holed up in the Sierra Maestra mountains in Oriente, a traditional rebel's lair. His headquarters, the capitol of the "*Territorio Libre de Cuba*," had an infirmary, a cigar store, a radio station (*Radio Rebelde*), and a newspaper (*El Cubano Libre*). Position papers were mimeographed, daily press briefings were held. Castro's Rebel Army, which had fewer than 200 guerrillas in the early days, did not do a lot of fighting.* As historian Hugh Thomas observed, Castro saw that Cuba's civil war was "really a political campaign in a tyranny," and he worked as hard at "seeking to influence opinion as he did as a guerrilla seeking territory." Cuban political leaders paid calls on him, and Roman Catholic Church officials assigned a chaplain to the Sierra.

U.S. journalists were also among the admiring visitors. In a land where license, as portrayed in Graham Greene's 1958 novel *Our Man in Havana*, was all too evident, the apparent selflessness of the Rebel Army reformers was striking. Herbert Matthews of the *New York Times* noted their daring, reporting how Raúl Castro had seized as hostages a "busload" of U.S. Marines from the Guantánamo naval base. Matthews found Fidel "overpowering," an "educated, dedicated fanatic, a man of ideals." Castro told the *Washington Post*'s Karl Meyer that he

*Indeed, a month before Batista's fall Castro had only 1,500-2,000 guerrillas. Neither the rebels nor Batista's forces—a pampered, corrupt officer corps leading \$30-a-month recruits—cared much for combat. Deaths on all sides during 1952-58 probably totaled about 2,000; unhappily, those who suffered most were members of the anti-Batista Civic Resistance (many of them boys and girls) in the cities.

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had no political ambitions; after the revolution, he might go into farming.

Without the attention that Castro generated, the fateful 1958 U.S. embargo of arms to Batista might not have occurred. Indeed, after Castro's victory, Ernesto "Che" Guevara conceded that throughout the rebellion, "the presence of a foreign journalist, American for preference, was more important for us than a military victory."

Of all the rebels who had ever taken up arms in Cuba, none had appeared at a more propitious time in world history than Castro.

During the Cold War era, the Eisenhower administration was heavily engaged in holding back the Communists everywhere. Especially after Nikita Khrushchev came to power in the Kremlin in 1953-54, Washington and Moscow sparred repeatedly over the Western enclave in Berlin. And in 1954, a CIA operation had been mounted to remove what looked like the Kremlin's first beachhead in the Western Hemisphere, the pro-Soviet regime of Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala.

U.S. officials were wary of Castro and hoped to forestall a regime led by him. But by December 1958, when Ambassador Earl E. T. Smith was directed to nudge Batista into exile, it was too late.

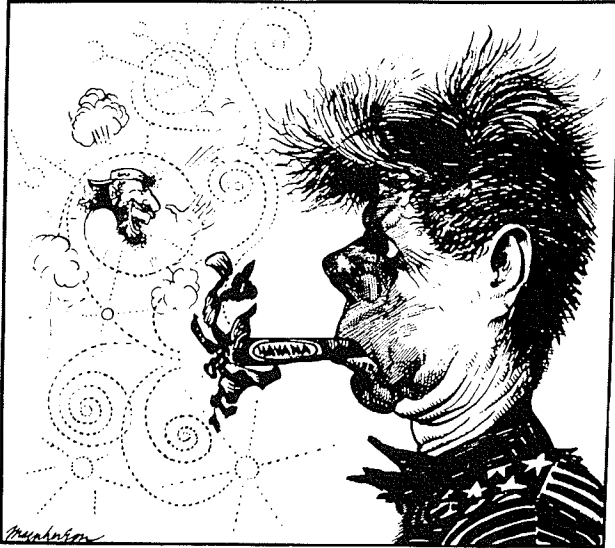
Watching the *Barbudos*

On the day Batista fled,* Eisenhower was busy with Berlin (he sent Khrushchev a message that a solution there was "critically important"). The State Department quickly recognized Havana's new government—nominally headed by a provisional president, Judge Manuel Urrutia Lleo. (He happened to be the only judge to vote for Castro's acquittal at the Moncada trial.) But what was the new regime's true nature? Castro's 26th of July Movement was clearly dominant. Dulles's undersecretary, Christian Herter, was sure that Cuba's long-outlawed, pro-Soviet Communists had penetrated the movement; Dulles's brother Allen, the CIA director, was sure that, even so, the Communists would not shape Castro's policies. For his part, the new U.S. ambassador to Cuba, Philip Bonsal, viewed Castro as a "nice fellow" who was taking advice from all parts of the anti-Batista spectrum.

But by April 1959, when Castro visited the United States at the invitation of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, his revolution was showing an antidemocratic and anti-*Yanqui* turn. The Communist Party was legalized. Elections were postponed, dashing hopes for Castro's promised "return to the 1940 Constitution." Anti-American jibes appeared in Fidel's speeches (he vowed to "do things better than those who spoke of democracy and sent Sherman tanks to Batista"). And a spate of trials, including one in Havana's sports stadium, meted out rough justice to Batista "criminals" and "counterrevolutionaries."

Americans became concerned about the *barbudos* (bearded ones) in

*He went to the Dominican Republic, then ruled by his sometime foe Rafael Trujillo, before beginning a comfortable exile in Spain. He died in 1973 at age 72.



A post-Bay of Pigs cartoon. A Kennedy commission found that "no long-term living" with Castro was possible. But JFK, historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., wrote, was "drifting toward accommodation" before his death in 1963.

Havana. When Castro visited Washington, Eisenhower went out of town on a golfing holiday, leaving the Cuban prime minister to meet with Vice President Richard M. Nixon. (Nixon thought Castro "naive" about communism, but felt then that he did not appear to be a Communist himself.)

By early 1961 there had been perhaps 2,000 executions in Cuba. In 1965, Castro himself would mention 20,000 political prisoners on the Isle of Pines and elsewhere; others put the total closer to 40,000. Some were ex-*Fidelistas*: The Revolution was devouring its own.

Back home after his 1959 U.S. visit, Fidel found himself under fire from the left for being conciliatory to U.S. business interests and from rightists, including Urrutia, for being soft on the Communists. Seizing the hour, he enacted a sweeping land reform program, nationalizing the estates of such U.S. owners as the United Fruit Company and the King Ranch. Urrutia soon fled to the United States, and Florida-based Cuban exiles began sporadic raids on the island.

In January 1960, senior Washington planners ("Committee 5412") began to consider ways to overthrow "the mad man," as Eisenhower now called Castro. In March, five weeks after Soviet Deputy Premier Anastas Mikoyan visited Havana, the CIA began devising an elaborate scheme to oust Castro that included a landing in Cuba by an exile force. Castro learned of the CIA project in two days; he soon formally established relations with the Soviet Union.

Events then moved quickly, spurred by Soviet-American antagonisms. In May 1960, at the behest of U.S. officials, Cuba's three main oil refiners—Standard Oil, Texaco, and Royal Dutch Shell—informed Havana that they would not accept the Soviet crude that they were told was coming. Castro subsequently ordered the foreigners to refine the Soviet oil or be nationalized. That very day, the U.S. House of Representatives authorized the president to cut Cuba's sugar quota. By the time the law was signed on July 6, the oil refineries had been seized.

Then Castro nationalized the Cuban holdings (total value: \$1.8 billion) of all U.S. firms—there were more than 1,000, led by such giants as International Telephone and Telegraph, Cuban Electric Company, North American Sugar Industries, and Freeport Nickel Company. Eisenhower invoked the Trading with the Enemy Act of 1917 to bar further U.S. commerce with Cuba. And two weeks before John F. Kennedy's 1961 inauguration, he broke diplomatic relations with Havana.

The break would turn out to be all but permanent.

Throwing Away the Key

Kennedy abandoned Eisenhower's step-by-step pressure, but not the CIA's invasion plans. Crushed by Castro's forces within 48 hours, the poorly conceived landing by 1,350 Cuban exiles at the Bay of Pigs gave Fidel a rationale for ordering a permanent military alert and embracing his Soviet ally. That December he declared himself a Marxist-Leninist.

By then, Kennedy had authorized planning for "Operation Mongoose," a six-phase effort designed to "help Cuba overthrow" Castro. The goals never came close to realization.* The culmination, an "open revolt" in Cuba, was to occur in October 1962—which instead turned out to be the month of the famous U.S.-Soviet Missile Crisis.

Nikita Khrushchev, who had feared since the Bay of Pigs that Moscow might "lose Cuba" to another attack, had shipped 42 medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs) to the island—the rockets whose discovery by U.S. intelligence triggered the great confrontation. Although Castro was left out of the 13 days of tense negotiations, he fared rather well. As Senator Barry Goldwater (R.-Ariz.) complained, JFK forced the Soviets to remove the MRBMs,† yet his implicit pledge not to invade Cuba had "locked Castro and communism into Latin America and thrown away the key to their removal."

Thereafter, U.S. policy on Cuba remained essentially frozen.

*When Mongoose was created, the CIA pulled out old plans to kill Castro. Senate hearings in 1975 detailed six attempts, some involving such fanciful devices as cigars packed with explosives. Former CIA director Richard Helms testified that assassination was never formally ordered. Yet, as the agency saw it, the policy was "to get rid of Castro," and murder "was within what was expected."

† The Soviets also withdrew their Il-28 bombers. And a secret part of the agreement called for removal of the obsolete U.S. Jupiter missiles close to Soviet territory in Turkey. They were pulled out in April 1963, without announcement.

Castro did poorly in U.S. opinion polls from the start, and the press euphoria faded. (*Life* was soon noting that “glory and noble purpose” in Cuba had become “demagoguery and chaos.”)

Yet for many Americans, Castro was a charismatic figure. Posters emblazoned with the slogan *Venceremos* (We shall conquer) and his (or Che's) image papered college dorms; many young *Yanquis* went to Cuba as volunteer cane-cutters. To Havana trooped such Castro admirers as writer Lee Lockwood (who saw Fidel as “a bearded Parsifal”), economist Edward Boorstein, and sociologist C. Wright Mills. In *Listen, Yankee* (1960), framed as a lecture by a Cuban to Americans, Mills wrote that “Cuba is your big chance”—a chance to “make it clear how you’re going to respond to all the chaos and tumult and glory, all the revolution and bloody mess and enormous hopes that are coming about among all the impoverished, disease-ridden, illiterate, hungry peoples of the world in which you, Yankee, are getting so fat and drowsy.”

Castro also charmed other foreign notables. Khrushchev, Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser, and India's Jawaharlal Nehru paid homage to the Maximum Leader in 1960, when he stayed at Harlem's Hotel Teresa while attending the opening of the United Nations General Assembly. Among other callers in Havana were Nicaraguan poet Ernesto Cardenal, Soviet poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko, French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, French agronomist René Dumont, Paris journalist K. S. Karol (whose books Fidel banned for their “leftist” criticism of the Revolution), and Ahmed Ben Bella, the first head of independent Algeria.

Ben Bella invoked Castro in his speeches so often that one of his aides suggested he stop until Fidel mentioned *him* once. (Ben Bella was silent on Castro thereafter.) After a 1962 visit by Ben Bella, Castro dispatched 50 medical students to Algeria, beginning his practice of sending “volunteers” to Third World countries.

Stability in Angola

Picking up part of the Eisenhower-Kennedy plan, President Lyndon B. Johnson continued covert anti-Castro activities, while Che Guevara tried in vain to stir up revolution in Central and South America.* In 1964, Johnson persuaded the 21-nation Organization of American States (OAS) to vote to condemn Cuban “aggression and intervention” in Venezuela, and to sever all diplomatic and economic ties with Havana.

The first U.S. effort to open a dialogue with Havana did not occur until 1975. Henry Kissinger, Gerald Ford's secretary of state, signaled in a speech that Washington saw “no virtue in perpetual antagonism” with Cuba. Subsequently, a majority of OAS members voted to end the 11-year collective embargo of the island. And Assistant Secretary of State William D. Rogers, meeting Cuban emissaries, said that even the Guan-

*Partly out of fear that civil strife would turn the Dominican Republic into “another Cuba,” LBJ sent in some 22,000 Marines and paratroopers to restore order in Santo Domingo in 1965.

tánamo naval base, leased "in perpetuity" since 1901, could be negotiated. Castro's frosty response was to raise Cuba's troop strength in Angola and begin advocating Puerto Rican independence.

Polls continued to show Americans to be, overall, highly critical of Castro. Yet a shift began to appear among businessmen. By the time Jimmy Carter came to the White House in 1977, many firms were examining the possibility of doing business in Cuba; Dow Chemical, the Florida East Coast Railway, and Burroughs Corp. were ready to invest.

But, Castro still seemed uninterested in restoring relations.

In an early speech, Carter declared it time to put to rest an "inordinate fear of communism": Cuba was no longer considered a threat to U.S. security. His United Nations ambassador, Andrew Young, even argued that Castro's troops in Angola brought "stability and order."

Agreements were signed on fishing rights and other matters. Negotiations led to diplomatic "Interests Sections" set up in Washington and Havana. Such notables as Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Frank Church (D.-Idaho) visited Havana. As Wayne S. Smith, head of the U.S. Interests Section there during the Carter years, recalled, full relations seemed destined to follow "in short order."

Go to the Source?

Yet once again, Castro dashed U.S. expectations.

The Carter White House thought it had an understanding that the Cubans would not expand their involvement in Africa. But early in 1978, Cuban troops arrived in Ethiopia to aid its Soviet-backed Marxist regime in a quarrel with Somalia (which had just expelled *its* Soviet and Cuban advisers) over the Ogaden region. Result: a split within the administration, primarily between Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski. The latter felt that "SALT lies buried in the sands of the Ogaden"—i.e. Soviet-Cuban adventurism in the Horn of Africa would kill the Soviet-American SALT II arms control treaty in the Senate.

Then in 1979 came what David Newsom, then undersecretary of state, calls a "bizarre and instructive" episode: The "brigade" furor.

A Brzezinski-ordered intelligence study found signs of a brigade-sized Soviet unit on Cuba. Senator Church, battling for re-election, argued that SALT II's ratification would require the troops' removal. Actually, the brigade was neither new nor in violation of U.S.-Soviet agreements.* But as Vance later wrote, "a rational separation of the brigade issue and SALT was not possible." Further openings to Cuba

*Neither the Kennedy-Khrushchev agreement banning offensive nuclear weapons and delivery systems in Cuba nor the 1970 prohibition of Soviet submarine bases covered ground forces. The "brigade," as veteran specialists knew, had been in Cuba since 1962. To Washington's requests that the brigade's weapons (among other things) be removed, Leonid Brezhnev replied that it was a "training" unit and that there was "no intention of changing its status." The remaining chances for Senate ratification of SALT II ended with the late-1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

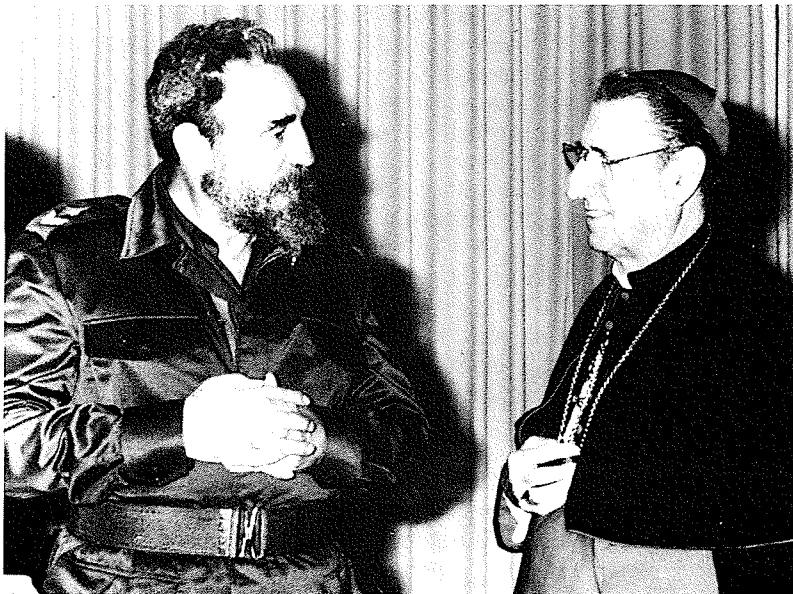
were abandoned. Indeed, Carter dropped plans to establish relations with Angola for fear of appearing soft on Havana.

"As a nation," Vance lamented, "we seemed unable to maintain a sense of perspective about Cuba."

Castro made that even more difficult in 1980: Angered by a crowd of working-class Cubans seeking asylum at the Peruvian Embassy in Havana, he offered anyone who wished to leave the island the chance to go to the United States. No fewer than 125,000 people showed up at the Mariel embarkation port—some of them mental patients and ordinary prisoners freed by Castro.

By the time Ronald Reagan moved into the White House in January 1981, Cuban troops were established in Ethiopia and Angola. And Havana was sponsoring the new Sandinista regime in Nicaragua, assisting Marxist rebels in El Salvador, and helping to furnish an airport suitable for jet transports for the Marxist regime on the tiny island of Grenada.

Reagan put some emphasis on the United States' neglected neighbors to the south. The first visiting foreign leader he welcomed was Edward Seaga of Jamaica, Cuba's southern neighbor. His first term brought both the 1982 "Caribbean Basin Initiative," a program to provide extensive aid to the region—and the October 1983 landing on Grenada. If Reagan did not "go to the source," in the phrase of his first



Castro, here with New York's John Cardinal O'Connor last April, welcomes American visitors, but cites a U.S. "threat." Cuba, he has said, will not be swayed "even if we have to live like the Indians" Columbus found in 1492.

secretary of state, Alexander M. Haig, he made it clear that further Cuban meddling would carry risks.

Interestingly, the Reagan administration subsequently concluded agreements with Havana on emigration to the United States and exchanges of technological information. (Thus a delegation from Cuba's atomic energy commission, which is headed by Castro's son Fidelito, quietly visited a North Carolina nuclear power plant.) And Castro released some political prisoners (albeit in anticipation of a UN investigation of human rights) and began warming up to the Roman Catholic Church (the Pope has a standing invitation to visit Havana). And the Cubans, joining in this year's American-led negotiations on the armed conflicts in southern Africa, promised to withdraw their troops in Angola—the main bar to a restoration of normal U.S.-Cuban relations.

Playing David and Goliath

It is odd, indeed, that the United States and Cuba should still have virtually no economic and cultural relations. The U.S. rapprochement with China is now a decade old. And even before the current thaw in U.S.-Soviet relations, the Bolshoi Ballet paid occasional visits to the United States. Moreover, Cuba's isolation in Latin America has long since begun to break down. Today, the only countries with which Cuba does not have diplomatic relations are Chile, Paraguay, Honduras, and El Salvador. And while Americans still deplore Castro, 51 percent of those polled in a 1988 Gallup/Potomac Associates survey favored talks leading to normal ties with Havana.

The roots of U.S.-Cuban antipathies go back 90 years, to the time when Teddy Roosevelt was leading his Rough Riders up San Juan Hill—part of the U.S. "assistance" that snatched victory over Spain from rebel Cubans and led to the island's long, quasi-colonial dependence on the United States.

Fidel Castro has invoked such ancient history to maintain what now might be called the "30 years' antagonism" between the two countries. It can be argued that Castro's policies have been more successful than those of the seven U.S. presidents he has seen take office. While Washington did succeed in isolating Cuba from the rest of the West, its chief objective—taking the island out of the Soviet fold—remains far from realization. And although U.S. antipathy made Cuba pay a price for Castro's policies, as the analysts say, U.S. *interests* have not gained. Indeed, the Americans have mostly been in the position of reacting to Cuban moves in Latin America and Africa.

The antagonism continues in part because, after so many years, it is more "normal" than normalization would be. On both sides, there are certain advantages. To emphasize his revolutionary credentials, Castro can denounce U.S. leaders (calling JFK an "illiterate millionaire," for instance) to his audiences at home or in the Third World without fear of

material consequence. U.S. politicians can denounce Castro with the same ease to certify their anticommunism.

Some factors that augur for change in the present frozen situation are demographic: Most Cubans have no firsthand knowledge of the Batista era or of American "colonialism," just as for many younger Americans the Missile Crisis is a paragraph in the history books. Another is that, since 1959, more than 10 percent of Cuba's people have emigrated to the United States (in fact, a tenth of the entire *Caribbean* population has made that journey over the past 30 years). And while the Cuban exile organizations all remain anti-Castro, some now favor opening relations with Havana.

But in diplomacy the old rule remains that, for a successful negotiation to take place, each side must gain something it wants. And therein lie some difficulties. For the moment, both sides are able to conclude that they do not have much to gain.

For his part, Castro has found it highly useful politically over the past 30 years to have a Goliath against whom he could play David. But Cuba faces pressures, brought on by the Castro regime itself, that it may not be able to bear into the 1990s: notably the cost of maintaining one of Latin America's largest and best-equipped military forces, and a now-huge level of foreign debt.

As for the United States, perhaps no aspect of its foreign relations has stirred more domestic passion over the past few decades than its policy toward Castro's Cuba. And no other political antagonism has brought the United States closer to a nuclear confrontation. Yet during 1959 and 1960, both Washington and Havana bungled opportunities to build a relationship. And by 1961, Cuba had become the first nation in the Western Hemisphere to join the Soviet system, and Washington had begun an elaborate effort to overthrow Castro. How do the poison pens, exploding cigars, and other products of the CIA mischief-making of the early 1960s fit the reality of a Marxist revolutionary regime seeking early support from the Soviet Union and bent on "exporting" its revolution? The history of U.S.-Cuban relations reads more like Ian Fleming than Henry Steele Commager.

Nonetheless, the United States and the new administration will have to weigh the nation's present no-relations policy against the benefits that might be brought by agreements in various areas (e.g., cooperation on coast guard matters and environmental issues) and by the symbolism of a Cuban "return to the West."
