

PRESIDENT REAGAN AND THE WORLD

Edited by
Eric J. Schmertz, Natalie Datlof,
and Alexej Ugrinsky

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U.S.-Cuba Relations during the Reagan Administration

Antonio R. de la Cova

When Ronald Reagan assumed the presidency in 1981, he faced two substantial Cuban problems unresolved by the Carter administration: there were 2,500 criminals and mental patients in U.S. institutions that had been expelled from Cuba during the 1980 Mariel boatlift; and the flow of Soviet weapons from Havana to Nicaragua for Central American Marxist guerrillas continued unabated. To meet these challenges, the "Reagan Doctrine," which supported insurgent groups trying to overthrow pro-Soviet regimes, was never applied to Cuba. Although the United States gave millions of dollars in economic aid and weaponry to Central American nations threatened with Marxist insurgency, and to anti-communist guerrillas in Nicaragua, Angola, Cambodia, and Afghanistan, members of Cuban exile organizations intent on eliminating Fidel Castro were surveilled, prosecuted, and jailed by the U.S. Department of Justice. Clandestine expatriate radio and television broadcasts to Cuba were prohibited by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC).

In spite of his belligerent campaign position toward the Castro regime, President Reagan pursued a diplomatic policy that had been outlined with five major points by the U.S. Department of State in a *Gist* document in July 1978.¹ One indicator that there would not be an immediate major change of American policy toward Cuba was when Carter administration officials Wayne S. Smith, chief of the U.S. Interests Section in Havana, and Myles Frechette, director of the Cuban Affairs Office in the Department of State, remained at their posts and were not replaced with hard-liners. Another manifestation of future policy occurred on January 16, 1981, when seven Alpha 66 commandos were arrested by the FBI in Florida while departing on an armed raid against Cuba. Frechette declared that the new government would not condone "terrorism."²

The Reagan administration also augmented the Carter policy of exchanging Cuban and American sports, educational, and cultural events. A few days after Reagan entered the White House, two Cuban Ministry of Higher Education

officials gave a conference on Cuban education at Boston's Roxbury College, and later gave a presentation at Harvard's Graduate School of Education.³ The conservative Republican government made another friendly gesture toward Cuba three days later when the chief of the Cuban Interests Section in Washington was the first Cuban official invited in twenty years to a White House diplomatic reception.⁴

In February, Roger W. Fontaine, a staff assistant at the National Security Council, tried to establish rapprochement with Castro through a Cuban émigré who had previously carried negotiation messages between Havana and Washington during the Carter years.⁵ At the same time, Secretary of State Alexander Haig declared during an El Salvador briefing that Cuba was the immediate source of the problem that Washington had to deal with in Central America. After repeating his threat against Cuba on March 3, President Reagan stated that Haig was not implying an assault on the island to stop the arms flow reaching Central American Marxist guerrillas.⁶ Two weeks later, Vice President and former Central Intelligence Agency director George Bush declared at a Miami press conference his opposition to possible CIA arming of Cuban exiles to overthrow Castro. The following day, Undersecretary of State Walter J. Stoessel, Jr., told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the Reagan administration did not support the Cuban exile paramilitary camps in south Florida or their goal of deposing the Castro regime.⁸

Castro reminded the United States, during an April 19 speech commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the Bay of Pigs invasion, that the Kennedy-Khrushchev nonaggression agreement that ended the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 was still in effect.⁹ The essence of this classified agreement was summarized in a letter that Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev sent to President John F. Kennedy on November 20, 1962:

What have we agreed upon? In brief, our agreement has come to the following: The Soviet Union removes from Cuba rocket weapons which you called offensive and gives a possibility to ascertain this. The United States of America promptly removes the quarantine and gives assurances that there will be no invasion of Cuba, not only by the U.S., but by other countries of the Western Hemisphere. This is the essence of our agreement.¹⁰

Kennedy did not refute this version in subsequent correspondence, and it became the cornerstone of U.S.-Cuba policy. The Kennedy-Khrushchev agreement hampered Reagan from applying the hard-line measures he proposed during his 1976 and 1980 electoral campaigns, such as blockading Cuba to force their troop withdrawal from Angola.

Reagan's initial conciliatory measures did not sway Castro. U.S.-Cuba relations soured in mid-September 1981 when Castro publicly accused Reagan of being a "fascist . . . covered in blood" for his support of Israel and the Salvadoran government. 11 A week later, Reagan signed Executive Order 12323 creating the Presidential Commission on Broadcasting to Cuba, which would

launch Radio Martí four years later. On October 30, the U.S. flexed its military muscle in the Caribbean with a month-long naval exercise. The Cuban government went on full military alert for what it called an imminent American invasion. Before the maneuvers ended, Haig held a secret meeting with Cuban Vice President Carlos Rafael Rodríguez in Mexico City on November 23. Talks broke down when Haig reiterated American support for the Salvadoran government and Rodríguez purported that Cuba was not sending weapons to the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) guerrillas. Both sides agreed to continue talks in the future.¹²

Secret conversations were renewed in March 1982, when Reagan sent General Vernon Walters to Havana for a five-hour meeting with Castro and Rodríguez. Walters offered trade concessions in exchange for the repatriation of the Mariel undesirables and the termination of Cuban military shipments to Central America, but Castro rejected the proposition.¹³ This impasse prompted the State Department to ban American tourist and business trips to the island, unrestricted since 1977, and allowed the U.S.-Cuba fishing limits agreement to lapse.¹⁴ A week later the Havana regime canceled the Coast Guard Agreement established under President Carter, which allowed joint cooperation against drug smugglers.¹⁵ Reagan then told reporters, "we don't have any dealings with Cuba. If they'd ever like to rejoin the civilized world, we'd be happy to help them. But not under the present circumstances."¹⁶ At the same time, the Reagan administration resorted to the "big stick" policy by launching the massive OCEAN VENTURE military maneuver in the Caribbean. In June, Cuban Vice President Rodríguez rejected the possibility of reconciliation between both nations.¹⁷

Two months later, the Department of State replaced Carter administration appointees Smith and Frechette, who did not endorse Reagan's hard-line Cuba policy, with other officials. Smith opposed plans for Radio Martí and favored lifting the U.S. trade embargo on Cuba.¹⁸ U.S.-Cuba relations grew worse after the November 5, 1982, Miami federal grand jury indictment of four Cuban government officials accused of conspiring to smuggle drugs into Florida.¹⁹

In spite of the hostile atmosphere, bilateral cultural, academic, and sporting exchanges increased in 1983. That spring, four Cuban intellectuals gave presentations in more than a dozen American universities.²⁰ A Cuban track and field delegation competed in Puerto Rico, while an American amateur boxing team went to Havana.²¹ During the same period, three Cuban musical groups performed in the United States and Puerto Rico.²²

On the other hand, sweet tunes were not blowing in the political breeze. In April the U.S. resumed SR-71 surveillance flights over Cuba, which had ended in 1979, and for the third consecutive year carried out SOLID SHIELD massive military exercises in the Caribbean and off the Guantánamo Naval Base.²³ Cuba countered with joint Soviet military preparedness maneuvers code-named BASTION 83, in which a mock attack was staged on Havana.

While both sides flexed their military might, on May 25, 1983, the Department of State sent a diplomatic note to the Cuban Interests Section in

Washington stating that the United States would stop issuing 'immigrant visas in Havana until Cuba accepted the return of the Mariel undesirables in American institutions, which was costing \$40 million annually.²⁴ Haig, prior to his resignation, had advocated sending the felons back to Cuba on an expandable ship escorted by the U.S. Navy.²⁵ Florida Governor Bob Graham suggested that they be returned to Castro through the gate at the Guantánamo Naval Base.²⁶ Instead, President Reagan stuck to a course of peaceful negotiations that lasted seven years.

The American diplomatic note was rejected by Havana on June 17, with a demand that normalization of migration be resumed before discussing the return of Cubans who had "illegally" migrated to the United States in 1980.²⁷ Castro became more conciliatory the following month after the Federal Bureau of Investigation in Miami arrested Eduardo Arocena, leader of the anti-Castro Omega 7 clandestine organization.²⁸ Reagan then responded to Castro's offer to withdraw all Cuban military advisors from Nicaragua by inviting him to break ties with the Soviet Union and to "rejoin the family of American nations."²⁹

While Castro maintained his distance from the United States, the validity of the Kennedy-Khrushchev secret agreement was questioned during a White House press conference by Cuban-American newsman Tomás Regalado. Reagan said that the Soviet Union and Cuba had abrogated the understanding many times by installing offensive weapons on the island. This prompted White House spokesman Larry Speakes to state that his government did not intend to annul their part of the agreement.³⁰ Reagan then claimed that the Russians had not broken the accord, although it is ambiguous, and for the third time asked Castro to abandon the Soviet orbit.

This rapprochement attempt unraveled on October 25, when American troops and others from the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States invaded Grenada to restore order after the coup that killed Prime Minister Maurice Bishop. Cuban forces in Grenada had 24 killed, 57 wounded, and 642 taken prisoner.³² Castro compared the Grenada invasion to Nazi treachery and the Pearl Harbor surprise attack.³³ The U.S. House of Representatives passed a nonbinding resolution urging the president to return the Mariel undesirables, along with the Cuban prisoners of war. Senate Democrats amended a bill with the same request.³⁴ Yet Reagan avoided their advice and continued four more years of diplomatic negotiations.

The verbal war between both nations increased during the following year, without impairing academic, cultural, and sporting exchanges. Five days before the 1984 presidential election, Reagan reiterated that in his second term he would continue negotiating with Cuba and would again try to persuade Castro to rejoin the western hemisphere.³⁵ Five weeks after Reagan was reelected, the United States and Cuba signed an immigration agreement to repatriate 2,746 Mariel undesirables, at the rate of one hundred per month, and the American Interests Section in Havana would start issuing 20,000 visas annually.³⁶ Castro lauded the Reagan administration for not fomenting "illegal emigration" from Cuba, and for "taking measures against groups-previously trained by the

CIA-who carried out terrorist acts against Cuban personnel in the United States," in reference to Eduardo Arocena's recent federal sentence of life in prison.³⁷

The Cuban dictator praised Reagan during his second inauguration for the disarmament talks with the Soviet Union, stressing that "Reagan might be trying to go down in history as a peaceful president."³⁸ Radio Martí, scheduled to appear on January 28, 1985, was postponed. A week later, Castro told the *Washington Post* that the Reagan administration was now more "realistic" by solving international problems through dialogue.³⁹ White House spokesman Larry Speakes responded that his government wanted "actions and not just words" on four major disagreements: subversion in Latin America; the massive Cuban force in Africa; Cuba's dependence on the Soviet Union; and extreme violations of human rights on the island.⁴⁰

In dealing with these problems, the Reagan Doctrine was never applied to Cuba. When Reagan was asked on March 11, 1985, at a forum with editors and broadcasters, if he would support a possible internal uprising against Castro, he declined on the grounds that it would create a great tragedy for many Cubans. The president added that he wanted to better relations with Cuba, although there had not been any substance.⁴¹ Part of the "substance" problem was that Cuba had not answered the American extradition request filed after convicted mass murderer Ishmael LaBeet hijacked a plane to Havana the previous New Year's Eve.⁴²

When Cuba refused to return the fugitive, the Reagan administration apparently retaliated by hastening the recruitment of Radio Martí personnel. On May 20 the station began daily broadcasts to Cuba of news, commentaries, music, and sports, under the auspices of the United States Information Agency (USIA). Castro immediately suspended the immigration agreement, threatened not to withdraw his troops from Angola, and accused the United States of promoting a "dirty war" in Central America.⁴³

Four months later, Reagan again opposed backing an armed overthrow of Castro and refused to denounce the Kennedy-Khrushchev agreement during a radio interview with newsman Regalado. The president offered to "help open the door" if Cuba decided to return to the western hemisphere community.⁴⁴ Castro's failure to renew the immigration agreement prompted Reagan to issue Presidential Proclamation 5377 on October 4, canceling entry visas for Cuban scholars, artists, and journalists and those with official passports.⁴⁵

Relations between the United States and Cuba remained tense for a year, with accusations and epithets flying back and forth between government officials. In November 1986, Reagan issued Presidential Proclamation 5517, halting Cuban entry into the United States from third countries, until normal migration procedures were restored. The president also tightened the American trade embargo on Cuba.⁴⁶ The Cuban Foreign Ministry replied that these measures would not make them violate their negotiating principles.⁴⁷ The White House then pursued a new venue of diplomatic pressure by denouncing Cuban human rights violations and requested an investigation by the United

Nations.⁴⁸ The March 1987 U.S. resolution before the UN Human Rights Commission criticizing Cuba's human rights record was derailed by one vote after ten Communist bloc countries and six Latin American nations, including Nicaragua, opposed it.⁴⁹

Meanwhile, American diplomat Kenneth Skoug, Jr., privately discussed with Cuban officials the renewal of the immigration agreement.⁵⁰ The U.S.-Cuba immigration agreement was formalized on November 20, 1987, after quiet diplomacy between both sides in Mexico City. The Castro regime agreed to accept the return of 2,600 Mariel "excludables,"⁵¹ while 23,000 Cubans would be allowed to emigrate to the United States yearly.

Relations between both nations then improved slightly. In January 1988 the U.S. Interests Section Chief was welcomed at a diplomatic affair hosted by Castro, after being shunned for more than a year.⁵² Three months later, the State Department eased travel restrictions for Cuban officials, a dance troupe, and a boxing team that toured the United States.⁵³ Meanwhile, seven years of diplomatic negotiations to withdraw 50,000 Cuban troops from Africa bore fruit when Cuba, Angola, and South Africa reached an agreement, with prodding from the United States and the Soviet Union.⁵⁴ The foreign ministers of the three nations signed the peace accord at the United Nations on December 23, 1988, guaranteeing Namibian independence and the phased removal of the Cuban military from Angola by 1991.⁵⁵ Reagan praised the agreement for ending a major regional problem in American-Soviet relations.⁵⁶ Ten days before he left the White House, the first contingent of Cuban troops departed from Angola on January 10, 1989.⁵⁷

CONCLUSION

The Reagan administration spent eight years applying political and economic pressure to induce Cuba to come to the negotiating table, instead of implementing the more belligerent Reagan Doctrine. The major diplomatic goals achieved by the United States were the evacuation of all Cuban troops from Angola, the reaffirmation of the Kennedy-Khrushchev understanding, the denunciation of Cuban human rights violations, and the implementation of the immigration agreement. The first three events were achieved with the cooperation of the Soviet Union, and led to better relations between Moscow and Washington.

Some of Reagan's diplomatic accomplishments with Cuba ran into trouble during the Bush presidency. The immigration agreement was disregarded by more than two thousand Cubans per year, including two of Castro's cousins, who floated their way to freedom in Florida on makeshift rafts and hijacked boats.⁵⁸ Although the immigration agreement was supposed to end the possibility of a second Mariel exodus, by May 1992, Washington officials were concerned that Castro could release another wave of refugees into the U.S. naval base in Guantánamo.⁵⁹

Radio Marti had a serious setback during the Bush years. When TV Marti began broadcasting on March 27, 1990, Cuba scrambled the transmission, and a few weeks later also jammed Radio Marti broadcasts.⁶⁰ The Reagan administration failed to halt Cuban support for Central American guerrillas because the Kennedy-Khrushchev agreement prohibited militarily going to the source of the problem. During the Bush years, the February 1990 Sandinista electoral defeat in Nicaragua led to the withdrawal of Cuban military advisors from that country and diminished Castro's role in Central America. When Soviet weapons shipments to the Salvadoran guerrillas ended, the FMLN signed a peace treaty in January 1992 with their government and became a small political opposition party.

The Reagan strategy of denouncing Cuban human rights violations was successful under the Bush presidency. In 1992 Cuba was condemned by the UN Human Rights Commission with a vote of twenty-three to eight for severe violations of basic human liberties. Russia was among those voting against Cuba, which mustered favorable votes only from totalitarian countries.⁶¹

The cornerstone of U.S.-Cuba relations, the secret Kennedy-Khrushchev nonaggression agreement of 1962, was honored throughout the Reagan and Bush years. In 1992 Cuban exile leaders gave Bush a 300,000-signature petition, asking for the annulment of the accord so that an armed struggle could be waged for Cuban liberty without interference from the United States. Bush declined to abrogate the thirty-year-old understanding and rejected condoning violations of the U.S. Neutrality Law. Instead, he reiterated the unyielding tradition of applying political and economic sanctions against the Cuban government to achieve democracy in the island.⁶²

NOTES

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16. Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Service, General Services Administration, "Luncheon for Editors and Broadcasters from Southeastern States," *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*, April 26, 1982 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1982), p. 500.

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19. The indicted Cuban officials were: Navy Chief Vice Admiral Aldo Santamaría Cuadrado; intelligence official René Rodríguez Cruz (who allegedly committed suicide in October 1990); former Cuban ambassador to Colombia Fernando Ravelo Renedo; and his former minister counsel Gonzalo Bassols Suárez. While other co-conspirators were convicted, the Cubans were never extradited or brought to trial. Mary Thornton, "Four Cuban Officials Indicted in Drug Smuggling," *Washington Post*, November 6, 1982, p. I; and United States District Court, Southern District of Florida, *United States of America v. Jaime Guillot-Lara et al.*, No. 82-643 Cr-JE, indictment.

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