

Fear and Loathing of Fidel Castro: Sources of US Policy Toward Cuba

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In the State Department I find there is a professional reluctance to mention Castro by name; curious psychological quirk, that.

David E. Lilienthal (January 19, 1962) (*The Journals of David E. Lilienthal: The Harvest Years, 1959–1963*) (1971)

Few issues are as emotionally charged in American foreign policy as those relating to Cuba.

Under Secretary of State David Newsom (1987)

We should never forget that new small countries can afford the luxury of acting on their emotions; great powers usually only damage themselves by giving way to emotional impulses.

Assistant Secretary of State Gerard C. Smith (1960)

There is a personal quality to this three-and-a-half decade conflict that has rarely been noted, but which nevertheless remains very much at the heart of the relationship.

Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College (1993)

Abstract. The Cuban Revolution shattered some of the most important policy formulations by which the United States had traditionally defined its place and defended its interests in the western hemisphere, for which Fidel Castro has been inalterably held responsible. Much of US policy towards Cuba during the past forty years has been driven by a determination to punish Cuba for the transgressions of Fidel Castro and a determination to resist a *modus vivendi* with Cuba as long as he remains in power.

I

For more than forty years the United States has pursued a policy designed to remove Fidel Castro from power. The policy has passed from one presidential administration to another, through ten successive administrations – three generations of presidents – Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives: with minimum public debate – and even less success.

Defenders of the US embargo appear undaunted by four decades of failure. The historic rationale for sanctions ended the moment the United States proclaimed the Cold War won. But the policy has persisted unchanged. On the contrary, changes – such as they have occurred, most

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notably in the form of the Torricelli Law (1992) and the Helms-Burton Law (1996) – have been mostly more of the same, always accompanied by confident predictions that the application of more sanctions would deliver the desired results – but always with the same results as before.

US policy presently stands at once as an anomaly and an anachronism. It has outlived its historical time and outlasted its political purpose. It is derived from assumptions that long ago ceased to have relevance to the post-Cold War environment, designed as a response to threats that are no longer present, against adversaries that no longer exist. The security imperatives that originally justified sanctions, based on the proposition that Cuba was an instrument of Soviet designs, to be contained on every occasion and countered at every opportunity, are no longer plausible.

This is not to suggest, of course, that sanctions against Cuba are without a constituency, possessed of an agenda and endowed with the capacity to allocate substantial financial resources through which to obtain political influence. The lobbying success of the Cuban-American National Foundation (CANF) is well-known. Nor are sanctions without support among those for whom communism and the attending curtailment of freedom of speech and press and violation of human rights are a genuine anathema, although it should be noted that many who deplore conditions in Cuba often appear to have fewer objections to cordial relations with other countries whose human rights record is less than exemplary.

But the Cuban-American lobby and anti-communism alone do not explain adequately the steadfast commitment by the United States to a policy whose most remarkable feature has been its singular failure to achieve its intended objective. The explanation must thus be sought elsewhere. That US policy may have long ago lost its initial instrumental rationale does not mean, of course, that it is without an internal logic. The sources of sanctions can be located within the larger context of the narratives by which North Americans fashioned the terms of self-representation. We must examine the realms of policy where the premise of the propriety of the US purpose assumed the appearance of being normal and universal, where the prerogative of power often passed for the pursuit of beneficence.

Much can be understood by returning to the beginning, to the point at which the interplay of complex historical circumstances and political conditions acted to give US policy its enduring form and function. The context of US policy offers insight into the content, from which to derive purpose as a source of persistence. This is to conceive policy as an artefact, a product of social circumstance, culturally derived and ideologically driven which, when turned in on itself, can be made to yield insight into the assumptions by which policy persists long after it has been shown to have failed and is without prospects of success.

The United States response to Cuba was very much conditioned by its deepening antipathy toward Fidel Castro. Policies that Washington perceived as inimical to US interests and contrary to professed values came to be associated entirely with the person of the Cuban leader. That Castro embraced communism was sin sufficient to guarantee US ire. That it happened in a country where the United States had historically imposed its will and got its way deepened the insult of the injury.

II

The die of US policy was cast forty years ago, the product of the moment, assembled as a series of improvisations and impulses, in response to circumstances and events, sometimes as conditioned reflexes, other times as pragmatic expedients. Policy calculations were derived from cognitive categories often flawed by a mixture of misinformation and misinterpretation, sometimes driven by factors wholly extraneous to Cuba, a process in which the US response as often as not contributed to the very Cuban outcomes it sought to prevent.

What happened in Cuba in 1959 must be viewed as one of the more improbable events in the most unlikely of places. North Americans viewed early developments in Cuba with a mixture of incomprehension and incredulity. Much had to do with the pace of events: everything moved so quickly, as events with portentous implications seemed to accelerate from one day to the next, in vertiginous succession. There was no frame of reference with which to take measure of developments in Cuba: no precedent, no counterpart, but most of all, there was no understanding of the larger historical circumstances from which the Cuban revolution had emerged. Senator Barry Goldwater was entirely correct when he described a US public who 'shook their heads in bewilderment' at developments in Cuba.¹

Much had to do with the nature of the Cuban revolution. Most immediate was what to do with/what to do about the sheer effrontery of the challenge presented by Fidel Castro: defiant, strident, at times virulent, denunciations hours at a time, day after day, stretching into weeks and then months: unrelenting condemnation of the United States for nearly sixty years of deeds and misdeeds in Cuba. 'There has not been a single public speech by Castro since the triumph of the revolution,' US Chargé d'Affaires Daniel Braddock complained from Havana as early as February 1959, 'in which he has not shown some feeling against the United States, the American press or big business concerns in Cuba.' US

¹ Barry M. Goldwater, *Why Not Victory?* (New York, 1962), p. 70.

Ambassador Philip Bonsal agreed, and on repeated occasions registered deepening concern with tenor of Castro's speeches. 'Tone and attitude arrogant, insolent and provocative,' Bonsal cabled Washington on one occasion. He would subsequently characterise speeches by Castro variously as 'fulminations', 'tirades' and 'mendacious, repetitious, and comprehensively fraudulent anti-Americanism'. Never before – certainly never before in Latin America – had a duly constituted and recognised government mounted so strident an attack on the past policies and practices of the United States. 'We have never in our national history,' Henry Ramsey of the State Department Policy Planning Staff commented ruefully in 1960, 'experienced anything quite like it in magnitude of anti-US venom.'²

The Cuban version of sixty years of Cuba–US relations was, of course, wholly incomprehensible in the United States, and therefore easy to dismiss and even easier to attribute to persons who knew no better or were engaged in mischief, in this instance most likely communists. On the other hand, it was also possible that Fidel Castro was insane. Director of the Office of Intelligence and Research for the American Republics Carlos Hall described Castro as a 'complete hysteric with a messianic complex, if not a manic-depressive', while Lloyd Free of the United States Information Service wrote of 'Castro's psychotic anti-American campaign'. By late 1959 Ambassador Bonsal had come to characterise Castro as a 'highly emotional individual' who suffered 'definite mental unbalance at times', adding that a speech delivered by Castro in October 1959 'was not that of [a] sane man'. Secretary of State Christian Herter had also come to believe that Castro was 'showing signs of increasing mental instability', and by early 1960 President Dwight Eisenhower had arrived at the conclusion that the Cuban leader was beginning 'to look like a madman'.³

All the while, Fidel Castro proceeded with the nationalisation of US property, beginning with the sugar corporations and cattle ranches and

² Daniel M. Braddock to Department of State, 18 Feb. 1959, Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Cuba, 1958–1960* (Washington, DC, 1991), p. 402. (Hereinafter cited as *FRUS: 1958–1960*.) Philip W. Bonsal to Department of State, 19 Jan. 1960, *Ibid.*, p. 747; Henry C. Ramsey to Gerard C. Smith, 18 Feb. 1960, *ibid.*, p. 794. For excellent accounts of the early confrontation between Fidel Castro and the United States see Thomas G. Paterson, *Contesting Castro: The United States and the Triumph of the Cuban Revolution* (New York, 1994) and Wayne S. Smith, *The Closest of Enemies* (New York, 1988), pp. 13–67.

³ Carlos Hall to Hugh S. Cumming Jr., 18 Nov. 1958, *FRUS: 1958–1960*, p. 672; Lloyd A. Free, 'The Cuban Situation', 13 April 1960, *ibid.*, p. 891; Philip Bonsal to the Department of State, 6 Nov. 1959, *ibid.*, p. 658; Major John S. D. Eisenhower, 'Memorandum', 27 Oct. 1959, *ibid.*, p. 645; 'Memorandum of a Conference with the President, White House, Washington, DC', 25 Jan. 1960, *ibid.*, pp. 763–764.

expanding to oil refineries, utilities, mines, railroads, and banks. And when it was all over, everything – absolutely everything – previously owned by US citizens, all \$1.5 billion of it, had been nationalised.

But the worst was yet to come. If it is difficult to underestimate the incomprehension with which Washington viewed Cuban domestic policies, it is nearly impossible to overstate the horror with which it reacted to Cuban foreign policy, specifically the expanding ties with the Soviet Union. Officials would later use the word ‘shock’ to describe their reaction to developments in Cuba. There is no reason to doubt them. ‘Cuba’s move toward communism,’ Secretary of State Dean Rusk later wrote, ‘had been a deep shock to the American people.’ Kenneth Skoug, the State Department Cuba Desk officer, commented in 1987 that the policies of the Castro government ‘came as a shock to the American people’ as it ‘allied itself eagerly and wholeheartedly to the chief threat of the national security of the United States’. ‘The Cuban problem,’ warned Under Secretary of State Livingston Merchant as early as January 1960, ‘[is] the most difficult and dangerous in all the history of our relations with Latin America, possibly in all our foreign relations.’⁴

How utterly implausible all this was, occurring in a country hardly thought about before 1959 as anything more than a place of tropical promiscuity, frequented by North American tourists in pursuit of illicit pleasures and risqué amusements. Cuba was not a country to be taken seriously. It was exotic, a place for fun, adventure and abandon; it was a background for honeymoons, a playground for vacations, a brothel, a casino, a cabaret, a good liberty port – a place for flings, sprees and binges. Suddenly everything was different.

III

It is, hence, within the realm of trauma that an understanding of US policy must begin. If the proposition of the Cuban revolution as shock in the United States is to be rendered plausible, its reach must be pursued deeply into the national narratives by which the moral and strategic terms of US security had been assembled. The degree to which people in the USA invested their well-being in certain ‘truths’ – incontrovertible and previously unchallengeable verities – was at the core of the calculus by

⁴ Dean Rusk, *As I Saw It* (New York, 1990), pp. 210–11; Kenneth N. Skoug Jr., ‘Cuba’s Growing Crisis’, United States Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, Current Policy No. 976, p. 4; ‘Memorandum of Discussion of 432nd Meeting of the National Security Council, Washington, D.C.’, 14 Jan. 1960, *FRUS: 1958–1960*, p. 742. See also Philip W. Bonsal to Roy Rubottom, 6 Aug. 1960, Philip W. Bonsal Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

which US national security was defined and defended for nearly 150 years. Central to these formulations was the time-honoured notion of the United States insulated by two oceans and hence distant – that is, ‘safe’ – from the potential perils of a hostile world. To be sure, the evidence suggests that this sense of invulnerability may have started to erode in the age of the Inter-Continental Ballistic Missile. The spectre of the ICBM notwithstanding, however, two-oceans still seemed to provide the United States with some measure of comfort.

The presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba shattered the terms around which the USA had fashioned a sense of its well-being since early in the nineteenth century. The missiles in 1962, and the subsequent deployment of Soviet combat troops, the establishment of intelligence-gathering facilities, and the maintenance of a Soviet submarine base on the south coast of Cuba challenged some of the central assumptions upon which US strategic planning had rested. In a security culture so very much shaped by notions of ‘balance of power’ and ‘spheres of influence’, the presence of the Soviet Union at a distance of a mere ninety miles wrought havoc on some of the most fundamental premises of US strategic thinking.⁵

But the Cuban revolution upset more than balance of power arrangements. It also shattered the sense of equanimity by which the United States had fixed its geo-political place in the world. Dean Rusk later wrote of the missiles as having ‘a devastating psychological impact on the American people’ and, indeed, what happened in Cuba was a nightmare come to pass. That Fidel Castro had provided the Soviet Union with entrée into the ‘backyard’ of the United States simultaneously stunned and sickened US officials. Suddenly the United States seemed vulnerable. ‘Soviet missiles installed in Cuba,’ Rusk feared, ‘could destroy our Strategic Air Command bases with almost no advance warning; missiles coming from the Soviet Union at least gave fifteen to twenty minutes to get our planes airborne.’⁶ Roger Hilsman, formerly Director of the State Department Bureau of Intelligence and Research, recalled the Soviet missiles and reflected on ‘what this sudden jump in the nuclear megatonnage the Soviets could deliver on the American heartland would portend for the balance of power in the world’. Former Assistant Secretary of State Edwin Martin invoked ‘historical’ reason as the source of US indignation: ‘It was accepted as a fact of life. Americans had always rejoiced in the oceans that separated them from hostile powers ... [N]o

⁵ On the matter of the presence of the Soviet combat brigade see David D. Newsom, *The Soviet Brigade in Cuba: A Study of Political Diplomacy* (Bloomington, 1987) and Cyrus Vance, *Hard Choices* (New York, 1983), pp. 358–64.

⁶ Rusk, *As I Saw It*, p. 230.

matter how great our military capacity might be, Cuba could be an enemy base for airplanes, submarines, and missiles which could penetrate our defense.’⁷

Related too was the matter of the Monroe Doctrine. Early in the nineteenth century the USA had proclaimed the primacy of US interests in the Western Hemisphere, and in so doing claimed a sphere of influence on a grand scale from which the European presence was proscribed. These elements were central to US strategic thinking, for they acted to expand the spatial buffers by which the United States sought to keep perils of the world at bay. No other formulation occupied a more cherished place in the canons of US foreign policy than the Monroe Doctrine. It assumed fully the proportions of a national article of faith, possessed of time-honoured reverence and long regarded as the cornerstone of US Hemispheric policy. That its value as a means of security was more illusory than real mattered less than its importance as a symbol by which to mobilise the political consensus necessary to protect and promote US interests in the region.

The Cuban revolution had a devastating effect on assumptions of US well-being. That Fidel Castro appeared to have lent himself to Soviet designs and allowed the use of Cuba as a base from which to threaten US security produced deep disquiet in Washington. ‘Cuba has been handed over to the Soviet Union as an instrument with which to undermine our position in Latin America and the world,’ President Eisenhower feared.⁸ More than a decade after the triumph of the Cuban revolution, former Ambassador Spruille Braden continued to despair over the shift in the balance of power, noting: ‘We have permitted the Kremlin to establish a strongly fortified military and naval base only 90 miles from our shores, equipped with missile sites and underground submarines pens, imperilling the very survival of the United States and the independence of all the American republics.’⁹

Fidel Castro challenged the plausibility of the Monroe Doctrine. Previously the fundamental formulations upon which the United States had based its primacy in the western hemisphere, in the name of the defence of the New World, appeared to have passed into desuetude. A

⁷ Roger Hilsman, *To Move a Nation: The Politics of Foreign Policy in the Administration of John F. Kennedy* (Garden City, NY, 1967), pp. 194–5; Edwin McCammon Martin, *Kennedy and Latin America* (Lanham, MD, 1994), p. 210.

⁸ Dwight E. Eisenhower to Harold Macmillan, 11 July 1960, *FRUS: 1958–1960*, p. 1002.

⁹ Spruille Braden, *Diplomats and Demagogues. The Memoirs of Spruille Braden* (New Rochelle, NY, 1971), pp. 402, 432. The Department of the Navy was succinct: ‘The Castro Movement in Cuba ... presents an immediate threat to the security of the United States.’ See ‘Recommendations for US Action in Cuba’, enclosed in Admiral Arleigh A. Burke to Under Secretary of State Livingston T. Merchant, 26 Feb. 1960, *FRUS: 1958–1960*, p. 814.

policy tenet of historic and sentimental value was no more. ‘The fears were in part military,’ presidential advisor Walt Rostow later recalled, ‘in part ideological, in part an ancestral sense that the Monroe Doctrine had been unacceptably violated.’ The Monroe Doctrine, former Under Secretary of State George Ball later reflected, ‘forbade European powers from intrusion into the Western Hemisphere, which we regarded – though we avoided stating it in those terms – as our exclusive sphere of interest and influence’, and to the point: ‘Castro took over in Cuba, slowly strengthening his dependence on Moscow and thus confronting America with a patent violation of a revered item of our national credo.’¹⁰ ‘This is the end of the Monroe Doctrine,’ presidential advisor Adolf Berle confided ruefully to his diary in June 1960. Almost twenty years later, former Ambassador Willard Beaulac continued to brood about Castro and the Monroe Doctrine. ‘Castro’s success in communising Cuba and converting it into a satellite of the Soviet Union,’ Beaulac wrote, ‘had reduced the Monroe Doctrine to a faded scrap of paper.’¹¹

US officials were unanimous: the emergence of a communist government in Cuba hosting a Soviet presence in the Caribbean was inadmissible. The implications were apparent and appeared equally dire to everyone. ‘The United States faces in Soviet-supported Castro’s Cuba an intolerable threat to its prestige and its security which has to be eliminated,’ warned US Chargé Daniel Braddock. The Cubans had ‘unacceptably violated’ the Monroe Doctrine, Rostow insisted, adding: ‘As Cuba emerged under communist control, a visceral reaction developed in the government that this was an outcome with which the United States could not live.’ Richard Nixon was categorical, warning that ‘Castro is a dangerous threat to our peace and security – and we cannot tolerate the presence of a communist regime 90 miles from our shores’. CIA Deputy Director Richard Bissell arrived at the same conclusion: ‘A Communist government in Cuba, ninety miles from the US mainland, was unacceptable.’¹²

The principal discursive categories through which the United States responded to developments in Cuba set in relief some of the more anomalous circumstances of policy formulations. The US response was

¹⁰ Walt W. Rostow, *The Diffusion of Power* (New York, 1972), pp. 208, 211–12; George W. Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern: Memoirs* (New York, 1982), p. 177.

¹¹ Adolf A. Berle, *Navigating the Rapids, 1918–1971*, ed. Beatrice Bishop Berle and Travis Beal Jacobs (New York, 1973), p. 709; Willard L. Beaulac, *The Fractured Continent: Latin America in Close-Up* (Stanford, 1980), p. 189.

¹² Daniel M. Braddock to Department of State, 5 Dec. 1960, *FRUS: 1958–1960*, p. 1142; Rostow, *The Diffusion of Power*, p. 211; Richard M. Nixon, ‘Cuba, Castro, and John F. Kennedy’, *Reader’s Digest*, vol. 85 (Nov. 1964), p. 283; Richard M. Bissell, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior: From Yalta to the Bay of Pigs* (New Haven, 1996), p. 152.

fashioned within the realm of absolutes under circumstances in which US power was relative. The problem of Cuba was that the traditional assumptions about US hegemony in the region were valid more as a framework for narrative constructs than as a guide for action, a circumstance which officials seemed only to have dimly perceived – if at all – and certainly one with which they were unprepared – indeed, unwilling – to accommodate. Under Secretary of State Ball articulated the US position clearly and succinctly in 1964: ‘Castro’s political, economic, and military dependence upon the Soviets [is] not negotiable.’¹³

IV

The problem with pronouncements of this nature was that the United States could not act in defence of historic interests – not, at least, without the risk of far more serious international complications. Much of the US angst over Cuba had to do with the degree to which available means were inadequate to desired ends. The deepening USA–Cuba dispute early insinuated itself in the East-West conflict. By terms of the negotiated settlement of the October 1962 missile crisis with the Soviet Union, the United States renounced the use of direct military force against Cuba, and thereby privately acquiesced to what it publicly had insisted was unacceptable.¹⁴

These were important developments, for henceforth US policy calculations involving Cuba were subject to larger international constraints. This was the meaning of the otherwise opaque statement made by Assistant Secretary of State Edwin Martin in September 1963:

To those who urge ‘stronger action’, I can only say ... that while military action against Cuba sounds like a simple proposition of ‘going in and getting it over with’, this involves awesome risks Neither should it be forgotten that what might ensue from a ‘tougher policy’ against Cuba could not necessarily be limited

¹³ George Ball, ‘Principles of Our Policy Toward Cuba’, *Department of State Bulletin*, vol. 50 (11 May 1964), p. 739. ‘[T]he United States’, affirmed Secretary of State Dean Rusk in May 1961, ‘remained prepared to negotiate with Cuba on any issue except that of Cuba’s Sino-Soviet ties, which was not negotiable from the US viewpoint.’ See ‘Memorandum of Conversation’, 9 May 1961, United States Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Cuba, 1961–1962* (Washington, DC, 1997), p. 514. (Hereinafter cited as *FRUS: 1961–1962*.)

¹⁴ On at least two subsequent occasions, the status of Cuba relative to the 1962 agreement was ratified. In 1970 Secretary of State Henry Kissinger reaffirmed the Nixon administration commitment ‘not to use military force to bring about a change in the governmental structure of Cuba.’ Ten years later, Robert McFarlane recalled, President Reagan deferred any direct action against Cuba ‘on the basis that the status of Cuba had been agreed upon during the Missile Crisis.’ See Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years* (New York, 1979), p. 634; and Robert C. McFarlane, *Special Trust* (New York, 1994), pp. 177–80.

to a clean-cut military operation in the Caribbean. The inter-relation of our global foreign policies practically insures that such an operation could not be delimited but rather could be expected to spill over into other areas, with unpredictable results.¹⁵

The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) expressed the same thought in much more explicit if classified language three months later: ‘There are only two courses which would eliminate the Castro regime at an early date: an invasion or a complete blockade. Both of these actions would result in a major crisis between the US and the USSR (in Cuba and/or Berlin) and would produce substantial strains in the fabric of US relations with other countries – allied as well as neutral.’¹⁶

Other factors also acted to limit US options. Considerable attention was given to the repercussions of unilateral action against Cuba in Latin America. Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Mann was not alone in his early opposition to unilateral US efforts to remove Fidel Castro. ‘[I]f we were to go all out to get Castro,’ Mann cautioned, ‘it would obviously be what we would do. What would the effect be in the other Latin American countries? [W]e have to maintain a steady pressure and keep our motives well disguised in this business.’ Assistant Secretary of State R. Roy Rubottom warned that if the United States were to ‘proceed at this time with unilateral intervention it would turn the clock back 27 years ... [and] cause incalculable loss in the hemisphere’. The Cuban revolution exerted an alarming thrall over many in Latin America, with obvious implications. Fidel Castro had ‘gained great prestige in Latin America’, President Eisenhower understood, which meant that ‘governments elsewhere cannot oppose him too strongly since they are shaky with respect to the potentials of action by the mobs within their own countries to whom Castro’s brand of demagoguery appeals’.¹⁷

The United States was loath to undertake unilateral military action for one more reason. No one in Washington doubted that the Cubans would resist a US invasion. The United States would prevail in the short run, to be sure, but only at great cost, many feared, and then to face the prospects of prolonged guerrilla warfare. ‘The Castro regime has made extensive preparations to resist a US military intervention,’ the Board of National Estimates cautioned. ‘It apparently plans for a strong initial defense against invasion and protracted warfare in the interior ... Substantial

¹⁵ Edwin M. Martin, ‘Address by the Honorable Edwin M. Martin, Assistant Secretary of States for Inter-American Affairs, Before the Los Angeles World Affairs Council’, 20 Sept. 1963, Mimeograph copy in author’s possession.

¹⁶ Central Intelligence Agency, ‘Cuba – A Status report’, 12 Dec. 1963, Record Number 1781-0003-10120, Gerald R. Ford Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

¹⁷ ‘Memorandum of a Conference with the President, White House, Washington, DC’, 17 March 1960, *FRUS: 1958–1960*, p. 863.

numbers [of Cuban troops] ... would continue a guerrilla resistance ... The establishment of a representative and accepted Cuban government would be greatly hindered by the persistence of terroristic underground resistance in the cities, and by continuing guerrilla resistance in outlying areas.’¹⁸

The imagery was far too dire for many officials to contemplate with equanimity. A small country resisting an invasion by a larger country evoked memories of the Soviet invasion of Hungary. ‘[T]he result would help the USSR,’ the National Security Council warned, ‘since American intervention in Cuba would be considered in many parts of the world as a counterpart of Soviet intervention in Hungary.’¹⁹ One reason President John F. Kennedy refused to commit US military forces at the Bay of Pigs was related precisely to the fear of another Hungary. ‘Under no circumstances,’ presidential advisor Richard Goodwin recalled Kennedy explaining. ‘The minute I land one marine, we’re into this thing up to our necks. I can’t get the United States into a war, and then lose it, no matter what it takes. I’m not going to risk an American Hungary. And that’s what it could be, a fucking slaughter.’²⁰

V

That the United States disavowed the use of direct military force against Cuba did not, of course, mean that Washington was reconciled to the continued presence of Fidel Castro. On the contrary, successive administrations never wavered on the desirability to remove the Cuban leader. Options had been reduced, however, and the few that remained risked consequences that went far beyond the realm of Cuba–US relations. ‘The limits in which we must erect a Cuban policy,’ Under Secretary Ball acknowledged, ‘are ... well defined and narrow.’²¹

Fidel Castro expanded into a brooding preoccupation in the United States. He cast a dark shadow over the country’s sense of well-being, a bad dream that would not go away. His presence was unacceptable but his removal was unobtainable. President Kennedy seems to have developed an abiding fixation on Castro after the Bay of Pigs, driven by

¹⁸ Board of National Estimates to John A. McCone, 10 April 1962, *FRUS: 1961–1962*, p. 784.

¹⁹ ‘Memorandum of Discussion at the 436th Meeting of the National Security Council, Washington, D.C.’, 10 March 1960, *FRUS: 1958–1960*, p. 834. Under-Secretary of State Livingston Merchant similarly warned that armed intervention in Cuba ‘could be made to appear as if the United States reacted the same way as the Soviets did in Hungary and other satellites.’ See Livingston T. Merchant to Admiral Arleigh A. Burke, 10 March 1960, *Ibid.*, p. 837.

²⁰ Richard N. Goodwin, *Remembering America: A Voice from the Sixties* (Boston, 1988), p. 174.

²¹ Ball, ‘Principles of Our Policy Toward Cuba’, p. 739.

a determination to avenge what many in the administration characterised as Castro's 'humiliation' of the United States.²² In early 1962, a White House task force proclaimed that 'a solution to the Cuban problem today carries the top priority in the United States Government – all else is secondary – no time, money, effort, or manpower is to be spared'.²³

Former policy officials later recalled the deepening personal pre-occupation in the Kennedy administration with Castro. 'The reactions ... were emotional, almost savage,' Under Secretary Chester Bowles described the mood of the administration after the Bay of Pigs in his memoirs. 'The President and the US Government had been humiliated.' Something had to be done 'to punish Castro for defeating our abortive invasion attempt', Bowles recalled, adding 'that we were now running the danger of becoming so obsessed with Castro that it was increasingly difficult for us to think rationally of the area as a whole.'²⁴ Only days after the Bay of Pigs fiasco, the National Security Council committed the administration to continue 'all kinds of harassment to punish Castro for the humiliation he has brought to our door'. Richard Goodwin later remembered Kennedy being 'furious at Castro, who had humiliated his fledgling administration', while former Deputy Undersecretary of State U. Alexis Johnson recalled that Kennedy was 'greatly provoked' by Fidel Castro, whom he considered 'an affront and wanted him out'. Added Johnson:

Having a Marxist regime seventy miles [*sic*] from American soil worried President Kennedy and offended him. Castro provided a base of operations for expanding Soviet influence in Latin America and made the United States look impotent and rather foolish ... [T]he President felt personally humiliated by a communist Cuba, and toppling Castro became something of an obsession for him.²⁵

CIA Deputy Director Bissell later wrote of 'the Kennedy administration's obsession with Cuba,' adding: 'From their perspective, Castro won the first round at the Bay of Pigs. He had defeated the Kennedy team: they were bitter and they could not tolerate his getting away with it. The

²² Several writers have characterised US policy under Kennedy as a 'vendetta'. See Taylor Branch and George Crile, III, 'The Kennedy Vendetta: How the C.I.A. Waged a Silent War Against Cuba', *Harper's* (Aug. 1975), pp. 19–63, and William B. Breuer, *Vendetta! Fidel Castro and the Kennedy Brothers* (New York, 1997).

²³ Richard M. Helms to John A. McCone, 19 Jan. 1962, *FRUS: 1961–1962*, p. 719.

²⁴ Chester Bowles, *Promises to Keep: My Years in Public Life, 1941–1969* (New York, 1971), pp. 329–30, 349.

²⁵ 'Notes on the 479th Meeting of the National Security Council', 27 April 1961, *FRUS: 1961–1962*, p. 397; Goodwin, *Remembering America: A Voice From the Sixties*, p. 180; Johnson, *The Right Hand of Power*, pp. 329, 343. Goodwin apparently shared this view, for at another point in his memoir he wrote that the 'United States had been defeated, the president humiliated.' See Goodwin, *Remembering America: A Voice From the Sixties*, p. 186.

president and his brother were ready to avenge their personal embarrassment by overthrowing their enemy at any cost.’²⁶ ‘We were hysterical about Castro at the time of the Bay of Pigs and thereafter,’ former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara recalled years later, ‘and there was pressure from [President Kennedy and the Attorney General] to do something about Castro.’²⁷

Notions of injured national pride, of humiliation and embarrassment, all attributed directly to the person of Fidel Castro, served to shape the context in which North American officials developed policy toward Cuba. Richard Nixon sustained an enduring preoccupation with Fidel Castro, one that dated back to his years as Vice President. ‘Cuba was a neuralgic problem for Nixon,’ Henry Kissinger recalled years later. On the matter of Fidel Castro, Nixon was adamant. ‘There’ll be no change toward that bastard while I’m President,’ he vowed to an aide.²⁸

The casting of Castro as an ‘affront’, of having ‘offended the United States’, but most of all the proposition of Castro as a source of humiliation, insinuated itself deeply into US sensibilities and early served to transform Castro into something of an enduring national obsession.²⁹ The very presence of Castro seemed to diminish the prestige of the United States at home and abroad. He was an embarrassment. Communism in Cuba appeared to make a mockery of the US claim to leadership of the Free World, for if the United States could not contain the expansion of communism 90 miles from its own shores, how could it be expected to resist communism in Europe, Asia, and Africa? An editorial from the Battle Creek *Enquirer and News* entered into the *Congressional Record* bristled with indignation:

²⁶ Bissell, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior*, p. 201.

²⁷ US Congress, Senate, Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, *Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders*, pp. 157–8.

²⁸ Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years* (New York, 1979), p. 633; Roger Morris, *Uncertain Greatness: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy* (New York, 1977), p. 106.

²⁹ ‘Humiliation’ seems to have been the watchword among US officials. ‘I cannot allow my country,’ protested Representative Silvio Conte in 1960, ‘to continue to suffer the constant humiliation and opprobrium heaped upon her in an irresponsible manner.’ See *Congressional Record*, 30 June 1960, 86th Congress, 2nd Session, vol. 106, part 11, p. 15245. Representative Bob Casey wrote to President Kennedy in July 1961: ‘The American people have suffered repeated humiliation, as well as heavy financial loss, by actions of the Communist regime now in power in Cuba.’ See Bob Casey to John F. Kennedy, 28 July 1961, *Congressional Record*, 3 Aug. 1961, 87th Congress, 1st Session, vol. 107, part 24, p. 14554. The Senate Select Committee similarly concluded: ‘It is clear from the record ... that the defeat at the Bay of Pigs had been regarded as a humiliation for the President personally and for the CIA institutionally.’ See US Congress, Senate, Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, *Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders*, p. 135.

How much more of Fidel Castro can the United States swallow and still maintain – not its prestige and image abroad – but its own self-respect at home? Since the signing of the Declaration of Independence 185 years ago, this Nation has never submitted to such indignities as those heaped upon it in the last 2 years by the Cuban dictator ... How can the United States talk of resisting Russia in Germany and elsewhere in the world when a little nation of about 6 million people tweaks the nose and pulls the beard of Uncle Sam as it please?³⁰

‘We have become the laughing stock of the world’, Representative Steven B. Derounian decried in Congress, adding:

We have given the world high-sounding phrases, but have backed down recently whenever action has been required. The world has look to America for leadership but has found only blundering retreat. Now it is in the open for all to see that a little twerp of a man, holding nary a high card in his hand, has managed to bluff the leaders of the most powerful Nation in the world and forced them to cower in the corner ... [W]e cannot let this situation continue any longer. Castro is making this powerful Nation appear ridiculous in the eyes of the world.³¹

‘Cuba,’ Congressman Mendel Rivers agreed indignantly, ‘stands as an insult to American prestige, a challenge to American dignity.’ Senator Barry Goldwater described the presence of Fidel Castro as ‘a disgrace and an affront which diminishes the world’s respect for us in direct ratio to the length of time we permit the situation to go unchallenged’. Decades later George Ball wrote with an ire reminiscent of the early 1960s: ‘Castro’s Cuba formed an overhanging cloud of public shame and obsession. Many Americans felt outraged and vulnerable that a Communist outpost should exist so close to their country. Castro’s Soviet ties seemed an affront to our history.’³²

VI

Unable to topple Fidel Castro from without, the United States resorted to sanctions as a means to induce collapse from within. Many in Washington had initially viewed sanctions with misgivings, reluctant to adopt measures that punished the Cuban people for the sins of the Cuban government. But the realisation that Fidel Castro enjoyed widespread popular support acted early to diminish official reservations. Under Secretary of State Douglas Dillon was originally opposed to actions that ‘would have a serious effect on the Cuban people’, but soon changed his

³⁰ The editorial was entered into the *Congressional Record*, Appendix, 31 July 1960, 87th Congress, 1st Session, vol. 107, part 24, p. A5892.

³¹ *Congressional Record*, 3 Aug. 1961, 87th Congress, 1st Session, vol. 107, part 11, p. 14551.

³² *Congressional Record*, 4 Jan. 1961, 87th Congress, 1st Session, v. 107, part 1, p. 108; Goldwater, *Why Not Victory?*, p. 84; George W. Ball, ‘JFK’s Big Moment’, *New York Review of Books*, vol. 39 (13 Feb. 1992), p. 16.

mind: '[W]e need not be so careful about actions of this kind, since the Cuban people [are] responsible for the regime.'³³ It was thus permissible to punish the Cuban people. Explained Assistant Secretary of State Rubottom:

We have gone as far as we can in trying to distinguish between the Cuban people and their present government, much as we sympathize with the plight of what we believe to be the great majority of Cubans ... [T]he Cuban 'people' have allowed themselves to be hoodwinked and out-maneuvered, assuming that some of them have been alert, by the communists.³⁴

Economic sanctions were designed in conjunction with covert action. Indeed, the pairing of sanctions with sabotage was designed to foster economic disarray, disrupt production systems, and increase domestic distress through shortages and scarcities as a way to generate popular discontent with Fidel Castro and thereby impair his ability to govern and undermine his capacity to manage the economy. Sanctions were designed to bestir the Cuban people to political action by subjecting the population to hardship as a way to erode popular support of the Castro government. The intent was to politicise hunger as a means of promoting popular disaffection, in the hope that driven by want and motivated by despair Cubans would rise up and oust Fidel Castro. President Eisenhower approved economic sanctions in the expectation that 'if [the Cuban people] are hungry, they will throw Castro out'. Eisenhower embarked on well-defined policy driven by the 'primary objective ... to establish conditions which will bring home to the Cuban people the cost of Castro's policies and of his Soviet orientation.' The president continued:

I anticipate that, as the situation unfolds, we shall be obliged to take further economic measures which will have the effect of impressing on the Cuban people the cost of this Communist orientation. We hope, naturally, that these measures will not be so drastic or irreversible that they will permanently impair the basic mutuality of interests of Cuba and this country.³⁵

'[A] change in the sentiment of the lower classes,' CIA Director Allen Dulles similarly calculated, 'would only occur over a long period of time, probably as a result of economic difficulties.' Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Mann agreed, predicting that sanctions would 'exert a serious pressure on the Cuban economy and contribute to the growing dissatisfaction and unrest in the country'. President Kennedy was also confident that the embargo would hasten Fidel Castro's departure as a

³³ 'Memorandum of Discussion at the 436th Meeting of the National Security Council, Washington, D.C.', 10 March 1960, *FRUS: 1958-1960*, p. 833.

³⁴ R. Roy Rubottom, 'Memorandum for the Files', 6 July 1960, *FRUS: 1958-1960*, p. 977.

³⁵ Dwight D. Eisenhower to Harold Macmillan, 11 July 1960, *FRUS: 1958-1960*, p. 1003.

result of the ‘rising discomfort among hungry Cubans’.³⁶ General Edward Lansdale, charged with the coordination of covert action against Cuba, outlined US objectives:

Basically, the [covert] operation is to bring about the revolt of the Cuban people. The revolt will overthrow the Communist regime and institute a new government with which the United States can live in peace ... The political actions will be assisted by economic warfare to induce failure of the Communist regime to supply Cuba’s economic needs, [and] psychological operations to turn the people’s resentment against the regime.³⁷

There was, moreover, always the possibility that economic difficulties might provoke a crisis within the Cuban government itself. ‘[E]conomic hardship in Cuba ...,’ CIA Director John McCone predicted, ‘supplemented by sabotage measures, would create a situation in Cuba in which it would be possible to subvert military leaders to the point of their acting to overthrow Castro.’³⁸

The purpose of US policy was set in place early, the cornerstone of which was sanctions against the Cuban people as a way to remove Fidel Castro from within. ‘The only foreseeable means of alienating internal support,’ concluded Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Lester Mallory, ‘is through disenchantment and disaffection based on economic dissatisfaction and hardship.’ Mallory recommended that ‘every possible means should be undertaken promptly to weaken the economic life of Cuba’ as a means ‘to bring about hunger, desperation and [the] overthrow of the government’. Assistant Secretary Rubottom similarly outlined the approach by which ‘the United States use judiciously elected economic pressures ... in order to engender more public discomfort and discontent and thereby to expose to the Cuban masses Castro’s responsibility for mishandling their affairs.’³⁹

³⁶ ‘Memorandum of a Conference With the President, White House, Washington, D.C.’, 25 Jan. 1960, *FRUS: 1958–1960*, p. 764; ‘Memorandum of Discussion at the 441st Meeting of the National Security Council, Washington, D.C.’, 14 April 1960, *Ibid.*, p. 896; Thomas C. Mann to Christian A. Herter, 19 Oct. 1960, *Ibid.*, p. 1091; Sorensen, *Kennedy*, p. 722. ‘If Cuba’s splendid people understand that they must sell their sugar or their economy will be destroyed,’ predicted Representative Paul G. Rogers, ‘they will themselves find the way to deal with the present misleaders and fomenters of hatred who have seized the Government of this proud young Republic by force of arms and revolution.’ See *Congressional Record*, 30 June 1960, 86th Congress, 2nd Session, vol. 106, part 11, p. 15232.

³⁷ General Edward G. Lansdale, ‘Program Review by the Chief of Operations’, Jan. 1962, *FRUS: 1961–1962*, pp. 710–11.

³⁸ ‘Summary Record of the NSC Standing Group Meeting No. 7/63’, 28 May 1963.

³⁹ Lester D. Mallory to R. Roy Rubottom Jr., 6 April 1960, *FRUS: 1958–1960*, p. 885; R. Roy Rubottom Jr., to Christian A. Herter, 11 May 1960, *FRUS: 1958–1960*, p. 912. It is difficult indeed, in light of recently declassified records, not to read as hollow the protestations by Under Secretary Ball in 1964: ‘[L]et me make it quite clear that [our

The latter point was essential to the US purpose, for central to US objectives was the need to maintain the appearance that the collapse of Fidel Castro was the result of conditions from within, by Cubans themselves, the product of government economic mismanagement, and thereby avoiding appearances of US involvement. The United States sought to produce disarray in the Cuban economy but in such a fashion as to lay responsibility directly on Fidel Castro. The goal of the United States, Rubottom affirmed, was to make 'Castro's downfall seem to be the result of his own mistakes'. Ambassador Bonsal in Havana early stressed the importance of appearance: 'It is important that the inevitable downfall of the present Government not be attributed to any important extent to economic sanctions from the United States as major factor.' The United States, Bonsal wrote in 1970, sought 'to make it clear that when Castro fell, his overthrow would be due to inside and not outside causes'.⁴⁰ This was the purport of a lengthy 1963 memorandum by George Denney, Director of State Department Bureau of Intelligence and Research. The idea was to eliminate Castro 'without resort to invasion or attributable acts of violence and violations of international law', specifically by 'creating the necessary preconditions for nationalist upheaval inside Cuba ... as a result of internal stresses and in response to forces largely, if not wholly, unattributable to the US'. Denney continued:

If the Castro/Communist experiment will appear to have failed not on its own merits but as a result of obvious or inadequately disguised US intervention, or as a consequence of the fraudulent invocation ... of a unilateral and lopsided Monroe Doctrine, the validity of Castro's revolutionary course might remain unquestioned. This Castro/Communist experiment constitutes a genuine social revolution, albeit a perverted one. If it is interrupted by the force of the world's foremost 'imperialist' and 'capitalist' power in the absence of a major provocation, such action will discredit the US and tend to validate the uncompleted experiment ... Direct US assistance should be avoided ... Excessive US or even foreign assistance or involvement will become known and thus tend to sap nationalist initiative, lessen revolutionary motivation and appeal, and allow Castro convincingly to blame the US.⁴¹

Covert action played an important role in support of US objectives,

program of economic denial] is not aimed at the Cuban people ... We have never sought in any way to starve the Cuban people.' See Ball, 'Principles of Our Policy Toward Cuba', p. 744.

⁴⁰ 'Memorandum of Discussion at the 432nd Meeting of the National Security Council, Washington, D.C.', 14 Jan. 1960, *FRUS: 1958-1960*, p. 743; Philip Bonsal to R. Roy Rubottom, 2 Aug. 1960, *FRUS: 1958-1960*, p. 1042; Philip Bonsal, *Cuba, Castro, and the United States* (Pittsburgh, 1971), p. 117.

⁴¹ George C. Denney Jr., to John H. Crimmins, 25 July 1963, John F. Kennedy National Security Files, John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, Massachusetts.

principally by laying siege to the Cuban economy and thereby making the island all the more susceptible to economic sanctions. For more than a decade, the United States engaged in acts that today would be understood as state-sponsored terrorism, including scores of assassination attempts against Fidel Castro, the infiltration of sabotage teams, and the disruption of Cuban agricultural and industrial production capacities. The CIA was specifically enjoined ‘to stress economic sabotage’.⁴² Four key sectors of the Cuban economy were targeted: electric power facilities, including the destruction of electric generating plants; petroleum refineries, storage facilities, and tankers; railroad and transportation infrastructure, including bridges, railroad tracks, and rolling stock as well as port, shipping, and maritime facilities; and production and manufacturing sectors, including the industrial facilities, sugar cane fields and mills, and communication systems. The assault against the Cuban economy involved arson of cane fields, sabotage of machinery, and acts of chemical warfare, including the spreading of chemicals in sugar cane fields to sicken Cuban cane cutters.⁴³ One operation was designed ‘to initiate and conduct aggressive psychological warfare operations including calling for work stoppages, slow-downs, sabotage, and other forms of military mass action and widespread overt resistance ... conduct major sabotage operations targets against Cuban industry and public utilities, i.e., refineries, power plants, transportation, and communications’. Another project undertook a ‘subtle sabotage program’ that included ‘the contamination of fuels and lubricants [and] the introduction of foreign material into moving parts of machinery’.⁴⁴ Alexander Haig recalled the organisation of three or four ‘major operations’ against Cuba every month during the 1960s, noting: ‘The targets were always economic.’⁴⁵ The purpose of covert operations,

⁴² ‘Minutes of the Special Group (Augmented) (SGA),’ 10 Aug. 1962, in US Congress, Senate, Select Committee to Study Government Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, *Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders*, 94th Congress, 1st Session, Report No. 94-465 (Washington, DC, 1975), p. 163. Writing years later, Richard Goodwin, presidential advisor in both the Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson administrations acknowledged that US ‘effort to overthrow Fidel Castro ... included ... a kind of state-sponsored terrorism.’ See Richard Goodwin, ‘President Kennedy’s Plan for Peace with Cuba’, *New York Times*, 5 July 2000, p. 7.

⁴³ William Colby, *Honorable Men: My Life in the CIA* (New York, 1978), p. 188; U. Alexis Johnson, *The Right Hand of Power* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1984), pp. 344–5.

⁴⁴ Central Intelligence Agency, ‘Program of Covert Action Aimed at Weakening the Castro Regime’, 19 May 1961, in *FRUS: 1961–1962*, pp. 554–60; Roswell Gilpatrick, ‘United States Policy Toward Cuba’, 23 Jan. 1963, File 198-10004-10019, Califano Papers, Box 6, Folder 24, Special Access Records, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Hereinafter cited as SAR/NA); Central Intelligence Agency, ‘A Covert Harassment/Sabotage Program Against Cuba’, 13 April 1963, in Jon Elliston, *Psywar on Cuba: The Declassified History of US Anti-Castro Propaganda* (New York, 1999), p. 166.

⁴⁵ Alexander M. Haig Jr., *Inner Circles: How America Changed the World. A Memoir* (New York, 1992), p. 110.

former Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell Gilpatric explained years later, was to ‘so undermine, so disrupt the Cuban system under Castro that it could not be effective’.⁴⁶

The Department of Defense similarly designed projects to ‘accomplish the objective of economic harassment’. One plan specifically enjoined ‘[f]uel and food supplies should be sabotaged’, while another directive prescribed ‘major acts of sabotage on shipping destined for Cuba and on key installations in Cuba’. Another project involved visible preparations for a feigned invasion of Cuba, including an augmented Marine presence at the Guantánamo Naval Station, increasing naval operations outside Cuban waters, and ‘heckler’ flights in which high performance aircraft flew toward Cuba at high velocity and veered away just prior to penetrating Cuban air space, all planned to coincide with the sugar harvest. ‘[I]t is desirable’, commented a Joint Chiefs of Staff report, ‘that the [Cover and Deception] plan be designed to cause a reaction of great enough magnitude to include a call-up of the militia or a complete disruption of the available labour force. Therefore, it must be capable of execution either at the beginning of the harvest period, or at least no later than a date when the harvest is in full swing’. And to the point: ‘[R]esulting in the disruption of the available labor force during the latter portion of the harvest period.’⁴⁷

Through much of the 1970s and 1980s the United States maintained unremitting pressure on Cuba. Relations between both countries improved slightly if only briefly under the administration of Jimmy Carter. However, the possibility of expanded ties was frustrated by US efforts to demand ‘linkages’, that is, imposing conditions as a requirement for normal relations that included Cuba distancing itself from the Soviet Union and the withdrawal of Cuban armed forces from Africa. Cuba rejected these demands outright.

The administration of Ronald Reagan adopted an increasingly hard line against Cuba, charging Castro with subversion and mischief in Central America. Reagan increased restrictions on travel from the USA to Cuba, suspending US tourism as a way to deprive the island of a source

⁴⁶ US Congress, Senate, Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, *Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders*, p. 159. For general discussion of the US covert war against Cuba see Bradley Earl Ayers, *The War That Never Was: An Insider's Account of CIA Covert operations Against Cuba* (Indianapolis, 1976) and Warren Hinckle and William W. Turner, *The Fish is Red: The Story of the Secret War Against Castro* (New York, 1981); Tomás Diez Acosta, *La guerra encubierta contra Cuba* (Havana, 1997).

⁴⁷ Department of the Army, ‘General Pressures to Create a Contingency’, 11 March 1963, File 198-10004-10016, Joseph Califano, Papers, Box 6, Folder 9, SAR/NA; General William H. Craig, ‘Memorandum for the Chief of Operations: Cuba Project’, 19 Feb. 1962, Box 6, Folder 1, File 198-10004-10204, Califano Papers, SAR/NA.

of foreign exchange. In 1985, the United States government inaugurated Radio Martí. In the following year Washington tightened still further the trade and financial embargo against Cuba. The Reagan administration also manoeuvred behind the scenes to make Cuban foreign debt negotiations as difficult as possible. New pressure was added on US corporations operating in third countries to curtail trade with Cuba. New limits were placed on cash and gifts Cubans residing in the United States were able to send to family members on the island.

VII

Certainly the impact of US sanctions and sabotage waned considerably after the 1960s, as Cuba was more fully integrated into the trade system of the socialist bloc. The embargo remained in place, to be sure, but its usefulness as an instrument through which to pursue the removal of Fidel Castro diminished substantially.

Conditions changed radically in the 1990s. These were years of retrenchment and reversal in Cuba, a time during which Cuban relations with the Soviet Union deteriorated, the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, the end of the insurgency in El Salvador, and a diminishing Cuban presence in Africa. These were years, too, of the disintegration of the socialist bloc in Eastern Europe and, of course, the collapse of the Soviet Union. By the end of 1992 Cuba had lost nearly 95 per cent of the total value of its trade with the former socialist bloc.

For the second time in three decades Cuba's commercial relations with its principal trade partners collapsed, causing profound dislocation and disruption inside the island. Having lost Soviet patronage, Cuba found itself increasingly isolated and beleaguered, faced with dwindling aid, decreasing foreign exchange reserves, and diminishing resources, and confronting the need to ration scarce goods and reduce declining services.

The opportunity for the United States to settle old scores presented itself during the 1990s. At the precise moment that Cuba faced new and perhaps the most serious round of difficulties at home and reversals abroad, Washington acted to expand the scope and increase the severity of economic sanctions. The passage of the Torricelli Law (1992) and the Helms-Burton Law (1996) signalled the renewal of US determination to oust Fidel Castro. Deteriorating conditions in Cuba encouraged the belief in the United States that the time was right to deliver the *coup de grâce* to its enduring nemesis ninety miles away. The appeal of expanded sanctions was based on the perception that without Soviet aid Fidel Castro was vulnerable to increased US pressure. 'Castro is as weak as he has ever been,' Senator Bob Graham argued during the debate surrounding the

Torricelli Bill. Senator Joseph Lieberman defended the need to strengthen the embargo, insisting that '[t]his is no time to reduce the pressure on Castro', for renewed sanctions 'would deal a significant blow to the Cuban economy'. Representative Dan Burton agreed: '[T]his is the end-game for Fidel Castro. His time is up. Almost all of his dictator friends are dead, in jail, or disgraced.' Representative Robert Torricelli was confident in his prediction: 'The economic situation is already untenable. It is unlikely that with the tightening of the embargo Castro can be maintained for long.'⁴⁸

The expansion of the embargo was designed to deepen Cuban economic distress as a means of political change, once more an effort to use hardship as a way to foment rebellion among the Cuban people. The Torricelli and Helms-Burton laws were particularly harsh, both in timing and in kind, for they sought to visit upon the Cuban people unrelieved punishment, to make daily life in Cuba as difficult and grim as possible, to increase Cuban suffering in measured but sustained increments, at every turn, at every opportunity at a time when Cubans were already reeling from scarcities in goods and the disruptions of services in the wake of the Soviet collapse. Cubans faced a new round of shortages, increased rationing, declining services, and growing scarcities, where the needs of everyday life in their most ordinary and commonplace form were met often only by Herculean efforts. Representative Torricelli proclaimed his intention succinctly: 'My objective is to wreak havoc in Cuba ... My task is to bring down Fidel Castro.'⁴⁹

VIII

Sanctions did indeed contribute to exacerbating Cuban economic hardship and, from time to time, even produced the internal opposition desired by the United States. But the larger failure of the embargo – from the outset – was due principally to the contradictions of US policy. So fully determined to topple Castro, Washington employed a variety of contradictory strategies, seemingly oblivious to the ways that these policies tended to counteract and neutralise each other. The embargo initially inflicted the greatest hardship on those social groups with the greatest ideological affinity with the United States, including large sectors of the Cuban middle class, which is to say those social groups most fully assimilated into US normative systems. Sanctions took their toll first on

⁴⁸ *Congressional Record*, Sept. 18–22, 1992, 102nd Congress, 2nd Session, vol. 138, part 18, pp. 25971, 25972, 26920; *CubaInfo*, vol. 4 (2 Oct. 1992), p. 1.

⁴⁹ *Multinational Monitor*, vol. 15 (Nov. 1994), p. 2.

middle class Cubans, adding – as anticipated – to their discontent, and increasing their dissatisfaction. The suspension of US exports, for example, including consumer commodities, durable goods and spare parts, likewise played havoc with retail merchants, manufacturers and industrialists, many of whom found it impossible to continue in business and increasingly difficult to remain in Cuba long before their properties were nationalised. Richard Cushing of the Bureau of Inter-American Affairs travelled to Havana in early 1960 and took note of the early effects of scarcity. ‘There are increasing shortages of certain luxury food items such as butter and imported canned goods,’ Cushing observed, ‘but, from all indications, the poor still are eating fairly well because of ceiling prices on the basic popular food items ... Shortages of import items such as spare machine parts, pharmaceutical supplies, and electrical appliances are beginning to plague the upper and middle classes.’⁵⁰ Six months later, President Eisenhower wrote with a pleased if misplaced sense of achievement of ‘the great majority of the liberal middle-class elements in Cuba, which were primarily responsible for Castro’s accession to power, have now withdrawn their support and many have fled the country to engage in open opposition.’⁵¹ The first casualties were those social classes historically aligned with the United States, who shared US values and identified with US ways, and who in defence of their own interests could simultaneously have been relied upon to defend US interests.

The United States also encouraged Cuban immigration as a means of propaganda against Castro. ‘We should speak of difficulties in Cuba as though they were a natural catastrophe warranting the sympathy of all free countries for the Cuban people,’ Assistant Secretary of State Gerard Smith explained US immigration strategies. ‘Our propaganda line should be in favor of the “poor Cubans”.’ Smith continued:

We should organize to receive refugees from Cuba as the Americans did in the case of Hungary. If necessary, we should arrange to house and feed Cubans in special camps in Florida. As the Austrians did, we should revise our immigration laws to favor refugees and urge other members of the OAS to do the same. We should use such a program to demonstrate the rule that when given a chance people generally flee toward freedom and away from communism. Our case would be improved if Castro took military steps to block the flow of refugees. A few pictures of Castro’s men shooting refugees attempting to escape would do more to hurt Castro than a host of economic sanctions.⁵²

⁵⁰ Richard G. Cushing to Abbott Washburn, 5 April 1960, *FRUS: 1958–1960*, p. 881.

⁵¹ Dwight D. Eisenhower to Harold Macmillan, 8 Aug. 1960, *FRUS: 1958–1960*, p. 1050.

⁵² Gerard C. Smith to Secretary of State, 13 July 1960, *FRUS: 1958–1960*, pp. 1010–1011. Four months later, Smith also appeared to have come to a recognition of the contradictions of US policy: ‘If the curve of resistance within Cuba falls as opposition

It was the hope of US officials, moreover, that the flight of the middle class and the ensuing ‘brain drain’ would contribute further to Cuban economic difficulties. ‘Cuba has become far more exposed and vulnerable to economic pressure,’ Under Secretary Ball insisted in 1964, ‘because Castro’s internal policies have driven into exile several hundred thousand Cubans – the managerial and professional elite. There is now a great shortage of skills.’⁵³

The concept of sanctions, from the early 1960s up to the 1990s, was deeply flawed. The pressures created by four decades of sanctions – and these pressures were at times real and substantial – were in large part relieved by Cuban emigration. Even as the United States tightened economic pressure on Cuba, it also and at the same time loosened immigration restrictions for Cubans, thereby providing relief from the very distress it succeeded in creating.

Measures designed to produce economic distress thus resulted less in organised opposition than in sustained emigration. For sanctions to have had the desired political effects, it would have been necessary to have discouraged or otherwise deterred the departure of hundreds of thousands of Cubans, whose very discontent was the objective of US policy. The logic of the policy required containing Cuban discontent *inside* Cuba.

Immigration policies, and especially the Cuban Adjustment Act (1966), whereby all Cubans who reached US shores were guaranteed political asylum in the United States, served to facilitate the departure of the very Cubans whose discontent was the goal of sanctions, and actually contributed to the consolidation of the Castro government. Confronting daily increasing hardships and deteriorating living conditions, vast numbers of Cubans sought relief through emigration rather than risk even greater difficulties by engaging in political opposition – a wholly reasonable and eminently rational decision, made all the more compelling by the presence in Florida of a community of friends and families and the promise of public assistance. That more than one million Cubans were in the end sufficiently discontented with conditions on the island to abandon their homes, friends and family, often under difficult and hazardous circumstances, provides powerful testimony to the depth of popular discontent and, in fact, in some measure corroborates the effectiveness of US policy. Sanctions did indeed add to economic distress and contribute to hardships for countless hundreds of thousands of Cubans, for many of

elements leave and Castro’s vice tightens, how does an opposition register or return?’ See Gerard C. Smith to Hugh S. Cumming Jr., 2 Nov. 1960, *FRUS: 1958–1960*, p. 1113. ⁵³ Ball, ‘Principles of Our Policy Toward Cuba’, p. 742.

whom the better part of valour was to seek relief through migration abroad rather than risk protest at home. As long as the United States was prepared to provide Cubans with relief through immigration, the policy of sanctions was transformed into an ill-conceived means to an improbable end. As long as the United States persisted both in applying sanctions and permitting unrestricted emigration, the principal effect of the embargo was to exacerbate Cuban economic difficulties and increase pressure on Cubans to emigrate.

IX

Dispassionate policy discourse on Cuba under Fidel Castro was impossible. Castro was transformed simultaneously into an anathema and phantasm, unscrupulous and perhaps unbalanced, possessed by demons and given to evil doings, a wicked man with whom honourable men could not treat. 'He is a thug,' thundered Senator Connie Mack in 1992. 'He is a murderer. There is no question about that. You cannot enter into some kind of normal relations with an individual like this.' Georgie Ann Geyer's 1991 biography of Fidel Castro gave vivid voice to some of the more excessive forms of anti-Castro sentiment. According to Geyer, Fidel Castro was partly responsible for the Central American immigration to the United States, the hostages in Iran, and the Persian Gulf realignment; he was implicated in the assassination of President Kennedy. Without Fidel Castro there would have been no Sandinistas, no Grenada, no guerrillas in Latin America, no Marxists in Africa, no terrorists in the Middle East. Fidel Castro was 'wholly without human principle', 'always a destroyer', and with 'dreams of world conquest'. He 'invented, or perfected, or expanded the uses of every single one of the techniques of guerrilla warfare and of terrorism'. In sum, Geyer pronounced, Fidel Castro was 'an alchemist of the law, the century's doctor of disintegration and its vicar of breakdown'.⁵⁴

The issue of US relations with Cuba under Fidel Castro early ceased to be a matter of rational policy calculation and passed into the realm of pathology. 'As a nation,' observed former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, 'we seemed unable to maintain a sense of perspective about Cuba.' A report from the Strategic Studies Institute of the US Army War College in 1993 cautioned against the 'innate emotional appeal' driving US policy, adding:

To many, Castro is not merely an adversary, but an enemy – an embodiment of evil who must be punished for his defiance of the United States as well as for

⁵⁴ *Congressional Record*, 18 Sept. 1992, 102nd Congress, 2nd Session, vol. 138, part 18, p. 25968; Georgie Ann Geyer, *Guerrilla Prince: The Untold Story* (Boston, 1991), pp. xv, 4–5, 300, 353, 358–9, 392.

other reprehensible deeds. In this sense, US policy has sought more than a simple solution or containment of Cuba. There is a desire to hurt the enemy that is mirrored in the malevolence that Castro has exhibited towards us. If Fidel suffers from a 'nemesis complex,' so most assuredly do we.⁵⁵

X

The policy bears the traces of the trauma by which purpose was fixed more than forty years ago and derives sustenance in the umbrage that Fidel Castro visited upon the United States. Castro deeply offended US sensibilities. For more than four decades he has haunted the United States: a breathing, living reminder of the limits of US power. He challenged long-cherished notions about national well-being and upset prevailing notions of the rightful order of things. This is exorcism in the guise of policy, an effort to purge Fidel Castro as an evil spirit who has tormented US equanimity for more than four decades. Cultures cope with the demons that torment them in different ways and indeed the practice of exorcism assumes many forms. Castro occupies a place of almost singular distinction in that nether world to which the United States banishes its demons. Fidel Castro is the man the US public loves to hate: political conflict personified, loaded with Manichaen insinuations, the frustration of decades of unsuccessful attempts to force Cuba to bend to the US will vented on one man. US policy possesses a punitive aspect to its purpose, a determination to punish Castro, a way to avenge past wrongs, which in this instance means vanquishing Fidel Castro once and for all. *New York Times* foreign affairs editor Thomas Friedman was entirely correct in suggesting that the US position on Cuba is 'not really a policy. It's an *attitude* – a blind hunger for revenge against Mr. Castro'.⁵⁶ That Fidel Castro has endured at all, that he has survived countless US-sponsored assassination attempts, one armed invasion, and four decades of economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation, has resulted in no small amount of confoundment and consternation in Washington. Only the total and unconditional vanquishing of Fidel Castro can vindicate the policy to which the United States has so fully committed itself. By the end of the 1990s US policy assumed a life of its own. Its very longevity serves as the principal rationale for its continuance.

The United States refuses to deal with Fidel Castro in any mode other than a repentant one. Indeed, reconciliation with an unrepentant

⁵⁵ Vance, *Hard Choices*, p. 358; Donald E. Schulz, *The United States and Cuba: From a Strategy of Conflict to Constructive Engagement* (Carlisle Barracks, 1993), p. 18.

⁵⁶ Thomas L. Friedman, 'Give That Man a Cigar', *New York Times*, 29 Sept. 1999, p. 9. Emphasis in original.

Castro is almost inconceivable. Fidel Castro has thus far been unwilling to submit to the demand that President Ronald Reagan made to the *sandinistas*: to say ‘Uncle’. When asked in 1982 under what conditions the United States would consider normalisation of relations with Cuba, Reagan responded: ‘What it would take is Fidel Castro, recognising that he made the wrong choice quite a while ago, and that he sincerely and honestly wants to rejoin the family of American nations and become a part of the Western Hemisphere.’ President George Bush similarly encouraged Castro ‘to lighten up’, vowing: ‘Unless Fidel Castro is willing to change his policies and behaviour, we will maintain our present policy toward Cuba.’⁵⁷ Kenneth Skoug, former chief of the Cuba desk at the State Department, made the same point. Fidel Castro ‘has never been prepared to change his principles or his politics’, Skoug affirmed, adding: ‘While Castro holds power, genuine rapprochement between the United States and Cuba is difficult to contemplate ... Cuba is no longer a danger to the United States, but it will not be turned around. After the Castro era, rapprochement is all but inevitable.’⁵⁸ Representative Torricelli made the same point in 1992: ‘The United States has an interest in ending the Castro regime’s tyranny over Cuba. That is a simple fact. We have endured decades of Cuban subversion in this hemisphere and at trouble spots across the globe. We were brought to the brink of nuclear war by Castro’s maniacal hatred of the United States. Clearly, this is a regime with which we can reach no accommodation.’⁵⁹

More than forty years after the triumph of the Cuban revolution, the United States shows no disposition to arrive at an understanding with Fidel Castro: a time longer than the US refusal to recognise the Soviet Union, longer than the refusal to normalise relations with China, longer than it took to reconcile with post-war Vietnam. To put it another way, Cuba has been under US economic sanctions for almost half its existence as an independent republic. The Cuba policy of the United States has entangled itself in multiple layers of contradictions and inconsistencies, for which there is no resolution except the passing of Fidel Castro. The Helms-Burton Act made the issue explicit: there can be no normalisation of relations with Cuba as long as Fidel Castro remains in power.

At the heart of the difficulty with Cuba today is that the United States

⁵⁷ Ronald Reagan, *Reagan on Cuba* (Washington, DC, 1986), p. 21; George Bush, *Bush on Cuba* (Washington, DC, 1991), pp. 46, 60.

⁵⁸ Kenneth N. Skoug Jr., *The United States and Cuba under Reagan and Schultz: A Foreign Service Officer Reports* (Westport, CT, 1996), pp. 207, 212.

⁵⁹ Congress, House of Representatives, *Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Affairs: Consideration of the Cuban Democracy Act of 1992*, 102nd Congress, Second Session (Washington, DC, 1993), p. 77.

is in conflict with the consequences of past policy. What may appear to US eyes as Cuban intransigence is, in part, a manifestation of Cuban refusal to submit to the United States, borne by a people still convinced that they have a right of self-determination and national sovereignty. Not for the first time in the twentieth century, the larger moral seems to have gone quite unheeded. Small, obstinately independent peoples, imbued with exalted if perhaps romantic notions of nation, can be crushed but never conquered, not even by superpowers, and as soon as the big power weakens or turns its attention elsewhere, they will be back. It is precisely with such people that a mutually satisfactory reconciliation must be negotiated if long-term accommodation has any prospect of success.

Sanctions have been less a source of a solution than a cause of the problem. The Cuban condition is in varying degrees historically a function of its relations with the United States. It could be not be otherwise. For 40 years the United States has pursued unabashedly a policy designed to destroy the Cuban government. It should not come as a surprise, hence, that internal security has developed into an obsession in Cuba. It is the height of cynicism for the United States to condemn Cuba for the absence of civil liberties and political freedoms, on one hand, and, on the other, to have pursued policies variously employing assassination, subversion, sabotage and threatened invasions as means to topple the government of Fidel Castro. US policy does nothing to contribute to an environment in which civil liberties and political freedoms can flourish. So too with the failures of the Cuban economy. The embargo must be factored as a source of Cuban economic woes – indeed, that has been its overriding objective. The degree to which deteriorating economic conditions have been the result of internal factors, on one hand, and the effect of external pressures, on the other, may never be knowable but neither is the relationship disputable.

The only certainty in an otherwise wholly unpredictable relationship is that relations between both countries will resume, some day: perhaps sooner, but certainly later. The logic of geography and history simply provides for no other alternative. Cuba and the USA cannot escape each other.

The important questions, hence, are driven not by ‘if’ but by ‘when’ – and under what circumstances and with what enduring legacies – will relations resume, for when relations do become ‘normal’ again, the people of each country will carry memories of the last four decades for years to come. How these memories will shape the future can be considered only in the realm of conjecture, of course, but it requires no gift of prophecy to understand that the deeper the wounds the more difficult the healing. Cubans and the US population will long be affected

by these years of ‘non-relations’. It is in the nature of long-standing close ties between both nations, in those realms of shared vulnerabilities, that fallings-out tend to be particularly acrimonious, and that the negotiation of reconciliation and the renewal of trust must be considered among the most difficult transactions to complete.