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The Limits of Dialogue

Washington, Havana, and Miami, 1977–1980

❖ Hideaki Kami

In June 1977 a CBS news program broadcast “The CIA’s Secret Army,” a special documentary on the intertwined history of the U.S. government and Cuban émigrés. In the wake of the 1959 Cuban Revolution, the U.S. government had encouraged thousands of Cubans to leave the island and trained hundreds of civilians for an invasion of Cuba. Having abandoned these “freedom fighters” at the Bay of Pigs, the U.S. government launched Operation Mongoose, “the secret war” against revolutionary Cuba, using “the secret army” of Cuban counterrevolutionaries. By the time the U.S. government ended these clandestine operations, hundreds of Cubans had lost their lives and thousands more had served time in prison. Many nonetheless remained adamant. Some even waged a “terrorist war” against anybody calling for a rapprochement with Cuba. According to a representative for the fighters, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) trained them to fight the Cuban government with all possible means. “And right now, we don’t have the support of the U.S. government. We have to do it for ourselves.”¹

To the surprise of viewers of the CBS documentary, however, the U.S.-Cuban dialogue in the late 1970s had a transformative impact on the Cuban-American community. When Jimmy Carter initiated a dialogue between Washington and Havana and addressed issues of concern for the Cuban-American community in Miami, Washington’s new attitude strongly encouraged Havana to promote its dialogue with a group of Miami Cubans. The subsequent talks among Washington, Havana, and Miami resulted in the release of 3,600 political prisoners in Cuba and the visits of over 100,000 Cuban émigrés to their families in the homeland. A year later these consequences of

1. “The CIA’s Secret Army” (transcript), *CBS Reports with Bill Moyers*, 10 June 1977, in the Paterson Collection, microfilm. The Paterson Collection is a microfilm collection of declassified documents and other materials gathered by Thomas G. Paterson during his 25 years of research and writing on U.S.-Cuba relations during the Cold War period. The microfilms are available to at almost all major university and public libraries in the United States.

the dialogue helped to provoke the “Mariel crisis,” one of the largest and most traumatic migration crises in modern U.S. history. Around 125,000 Cubans left for the United States.

This article explores the complex interactions between diplomacy and human migration at a critical period of U.S.-Cuban relations. Washington long manipulated Cuban migration as part of its policy of hostility toward Havana. Yet, when Washington sought to normalize diplomatic relations and disengaged itself from the counterrevolutionary project, Miami Cubans referred to their collective history to demand greater attention to their needs. Cuban migration also was a matter of special concern for Havana. By claiming the principle of national sovereignty, the Cuban government viewed all internal issues as non-negotiable with Washington. But the Cuban authorities considered Washington’s suggestion for an improvement of relations with Cubans living abroad while reassessing Cuban policy toward the United States.

As a result, Washington, Havana, and Miami interacted more intensively than previously acknowledged by scholars. U.S. diplomatic historians who have examined Carter’s ill-fated attempt to achieve normalization of U.S.-Cuban relations provide relatively little information about developments in Havana and Miami.² Migration historians have documented the varying reactions of Cuban émigrés to U.S.-Cuban détente, as well as their conflicting political activities, from terrorist threats to private diplomacy. Yet, an analysis of declassified government records also helps to reveal how the shifting ideas and sentiment among Cuban Americans became one of the most controversial elements of secret U.S.-Cuban negotiations.³ This article seeks to incorporate the perspectives of the Cuban government. Particularly important are the declassified records of U.S.-Cuban meetings, the interview transcripts of a former Cuban policymaker, José Luis Padrón, and the unpublished memoir

2. Lars Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic: The United States and the Cuban Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), ch. 10; and William M. LeoGrande and Peter Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba: The Hidden History of Negotiations between Washington and Havana* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), ch. 5. Two of Carter’s officials also provide interesting perspectives. See Wayne S. Smith, *The Closest of Enemies: A Personal and Diplomatic Account of US-Cuban Relations since 1957* (New York: Norton, 1987); and Robert A. Pastor, “The Carter-Castro Years: A Unique Opportunity,” in Soraya M. Castro Mariño and Ronald W. Pruessen, eds., *Fifty Years of Revolution: Perspectives on Cuba, the United States, and the World* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2012), pp. 237–260.

3. Most of the Cuban émigré records cited here are available at the University of Miami’s Cuban Heritage Collection (UM-CHC). For the best works on the Miami Cuban community, see María Cristina García, *Havana USA: Cuban Exiles and Cuban Americans in South Florida, 1959–1994* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); and María de los Angeles Torres, *In the Land of Mirrors: Cuban Exile Politics in the United States* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999). For a Cuban perspective, see Jesús Arboleya, *The Cuban Counterrevolution*, trans. by Rafael Betancourt (Athens, OH: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 2000).

and manuscripts of Bernardo Benes, who acted as an intermediary between Carter and Fidel Castro.⁴

The article thus highlights the complex triangular relationship among Washington, Havana, and Miami as one of the fundamental themes of the U.S.-Cuban dialogue of the late 1970s. As Washington was reevaluating its relations with Havana, it also tried to reframe the roles of Cuban Americans in Miami by containing terrorism and addressing human rights issues. The Carter administration's shifting attitude toward Miami in turn enabled the Cuban authorities to envision a new economic future for Cuba, one in which Cuban Americans in Miami would play an important role. As other scholars note, U.S.-Cuban attempts to normalize relations deadlocked because of the Cold War in Africa, where East-West rivalry intermingled with North-South conflicts.⁵ But the subsequent miscommunication and disagreements between Washington and Havana over the issues of Cuban migration—human ties between Havana and Miami—also contributed to the breakdown of the U.S.-Cuban dialogue.

By bringing migration into the narrative of diplomacy, this article adds greater nuance to our understanding of the complex evolution of U.S.-Cuban relations. Because diplomatic historians usually deal mostly with the calculations of policymakers, they have paid relatively little attention to the international movement of people on the ground.⁶ Migration historians have already begun to view migration as a part of international history, but their central

4. This article is enriched by the Cuban literature, esp. Elier Ramírez Cañedo and Esteban Morales Domínguez, *De la confrontación a los intentos de "normalización": La política de los Estados Unidos hacia Cuba* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 2014). Ramírez Cañedo generously collaborated with me in interviewing José Luis Padrón and shared with me his other interview records. See also an unpublished memoir by Bernardo Benes, "Mis conversaciones secretas con Fidel Castro," in Folder "In his own words," Box 2, Mirra Ojito Papers, UM-CHC. Robert Levine uses this source to write Benes's semi-biography, *Secret Missions to Cuba, Secret Missions to Cuba: Fidel Castro, Bernardo Benes, and Cuban Miami* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001). However, Levine focuses on Benes's activities rather than on what Benes heard from U.S. and Cuban officials. Also, Levine presents his work without referring to outside sources, leading Padrón to claim that the book is "full of impreciseness and lies." See José Luis Padrón, interview record, Havana, 4 November 2013, p. 8, in author's possession. Yet, when checked against other sources, this memoir does contain some valuable information on U.S.-Cuban relations.

5. Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic*; Smith, *Closest of Enemies*; and Pastor, "The Carter-Castro Years," p. 257.

6. For advocacy for greater attention to migration history, Kristin Hoganson, "Hop off the Bandwagon! It's a Mass Movement, Not a Parade," *Journal of American History*, Vol. 95 (March 2009), pp. 1087–1091. A few exceptions include Jason C. Parker, *Brother's Keeper: The United States, Race, and Empire in the British Caribbean, 1937–1962* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Paul A. Kramer, *The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States and the Philippines* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); and Alexander DeConde, *Ethnicity, Race, and American Foreign Policy: A History* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992).

focus remains on the states' control of human mobility and its impact on the lives of migrants.⁷ As a result, much of the important question of how human migration might have transformed the definition of national interests—and the making of foreign policy—remains unexplored, especially by scholars of the Cold War.⁸ By seeking to link diplomacy with migration, this article fills the gap by tracing the peculiar relationships between the two, which have defined the nature of U.S.-Cuban relations and possibly those between other countries.

Carter's Approaches to Havana

Although some faltering contacts between the U.S. and Cuban governments had taken place from the early 1960s on without results, Carter was the first U.S. president to pursue a triangular dialogue involving the U.S. government, the Cuban government, and the Cuban-American community. He aimed for normalization of U.S.-Cuban relations to signal a new U.S. attitude toward Latin America in light of U.S.-Soviet détente, the end of the Vietnam War, rapid economic growth in Latin America, and the other changing realities of the world in the 1970s. Latin America saw U.S. policy toward Cuba as something that symbolized U.S. paternalism and interventionism. Along with the return of the Panama Canal, Carter believed that a new policy toward Cuba was necessary to present a fresh image of the United States. Moreover Cuba was one of the enemy countries with which Carter wanted to try dialogue in order to alleviate international tensions. “If I get an equivalent response from these countries,” he noted in his diary, “then I would be glad to meet them more than halfway.”⁹

7. For migration historians' works that address “transnationalism,” see Donna R. Gabaccia, *Foreign Relations: American Immigration in Global Perspective* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); Adam McKeown, *Melancholy Order: Asian Migration and the Globalization of Borders* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Eiichiro Azuma, *Between Two Empires: Race, History, and Transnationalism in Japanese America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Special Sorrows: The Diasporic Imagination of Irish, Polish, and Jewish Immigrants in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

8. For works by political scientists on ethnic groups and U.S. foreign policy, see, for example, Louis L. Gerson, *The Hyphenate in Recent American Politics and Diplomacy* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1964); and Tony Smith, *Foreign Attachments: The Power of Ethnic Groups in the Making of American Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000). Works by historians remain scarce, yet see, especially, Peter L. Hahn, *Caught in the Middle East: U.S. Policy toward the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1945–1961* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

9. State and Defense Option Papers, 3 November 1976, in Folder “Transition,” Boxes 41 and 42, Plains Files (PF), Jimmy Carter Presidential Library (JCPL); and Jimmy Carter, *White House Diary*

The question was how, rather than why, to pursue dialogue with Cuba. Carter's approach drew on the report of the private commission chaired by Sol Linowitz, former U.S. ambassador to the OAS. The so-called Linowitz commission comprehensively reviewed U.S. policy toward Latin America and presented policy options to Carter before his inauguration. On Cuba, the report envisaged a step-by-step negotiating process that would lead to normalization. If the United States made a concession, Cuba had to reciprocate the move. A series of reciprocal gestures would lead to normalization, the final aim of the negotiations.¹⁰ Reciprocity was important not only for withdrawing concessions from Havana but also for developing U.S. public support for U.S.-Cuban dialogue.¹¹

U.S. policymakers also considered the reaction of Miami Cubans, the most visible and vocal group on Cuban matters within the U.S. electorate. By April 1980 approximately 800,000 persons of Cuban origin lived in the United States, half of them concentrated in Florida. Cuban émigrés initially came to the United States as temporary residents dreaming of a return to their homeland. Yet as time passed, many of them decided to stay in the United States and applied for U.S. citizenship. Their political power was not yet as great as it became a decade later, but as they integrated into the larger society the U.S. government could no longer dismiss their concerns as irrelevant to U.S. national interests.¹²

Even more important was "international terrorism," in which some anti-Castro Cuban militants engaged from their bases in the United States.¹³ They viewed violence as the only way to stop the momentum for dialogue. Within

(New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), p. 27. See also, Smith, *Closest of Enemies*, pp. 99–100; and Pastor, "The Carter-Castro Years," pp. 239–240.

10. See the Linowitz commission's report, *The United States and Latin America: Next Steps* (New York: Center for Inter-American Relations, 1976).

11. State and Defense Option Papers, 3 November 1976, in Folder "Transition," Boxes 41 and 42, PF, JCPL; and Cyrus Vance to Jimmy Carter, 22 March 1977, in Folder "State Department Evening Reports, 3/77," Box 37, PF, JCPL.

12. The transition paper urges the new administration to make "special efforts" to explain new policy to Cuban-American leaders. State and Defense Option Papers, 3 November 1976, in Folder "Transition," Boxes 41 and 42, PF, JCPL. For demographic data on persons of Cuban origin, see Lisandro Pérez, "The Cuban Population of the United States: The Results of the 1980 U.S. Census of Population," *Cuban Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Summer 1985), pp. 1–18.

13. The U.S. government has defined "international terrorism" as "threats or use of violence for political purposes when (1) such action is intended to influence the attitudes and behavior of a target group wider than its immediate victims, and (2) its ramifications transcend national boundaries." This definition is used here, even though the definition of "terrorism" is contested. See U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), "International Terrorism in 1977," August 1978, in CIA, Electronic Reading Room (ERR), <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom>.

two years of March 1974, more than 100 bombings occurred in Miami, killing and wounding Cuban émigrés who spoke against violent activities or who advocated moderation toward revolutionary Cuba. On 6 October 1976, the Coordination of the United Revolutionary Organization bombed a Cuban airliner, killing all 73 people onboard, including all the members of the Cuban national fencing team. The incident infuriated Cubans well beyond the Castro regime. A million Cubans attended a national memorial service for the victims, where Castro accused the CIA of involvement in the attack.¹⁴

If Carter wanted a new policy toward Cuba, he had to prevent these terrorist activities. This was the first message Castro sent to the U.S. president. The Cuban leadership closely analyzed the Linowitz reports, read Carter's writings, and liked his ethics, upbringing, and religious beliefs. In February 1977, Castro decided to set forth Cuba's attitudes on numerous agendas in his private talk with CBS news correspondent Bill Moyers. Terrorism was the first issue Castro brought up. "Be against it. Don't let them do it with immunity." Otherwise Cuba would continue to view such attacks as "undeclared acts of war." Moyers' notes continued, "Imagine if we had trained to invade U.S., if we had tried to assassinate your president . . . if we had turned loose a gang of thugs to try to bring down your govt."¹⁵

Castro expected that the United States would treat Cuba as an equal in negotiations and would not interfere in Cuba's foreign and internal policy. He wanted Carter to remove the U.S. economic blockade on Cuba, which, he admitted, "has done us [the Cubans] great damage." He also suggested that Havana was withdrawing its troops from Angola, which had been a major concern to Washington. Two years earlier, when Cuba decided to intervene in the African country, President Gerald R. Ford had ended his administration's secret U.S.-Cuban talks.¹⁶ Yet when speaking with Moyers, Castro claimed he had been reluctant to intervene in Angola and was seeking to withdraw the troops. He also declared that he would respect the principle of non-intervention if other countries did the same.¹⁷

14. Speech by Fidel Castro, transcribed in *Granma* (Havana), 15 October 1976, pp. 1–3.

15. Handwritten notes on Moyers's conversations with Castro and Carlos Rafael Rodríguez, submitted by Cyrus Vance to Jimmy Carter, 8 February 1977, in NLC-128-12-5-16-4, JCPL. For Castro's view of Carter, see also Fidel Castro and Ignacio Ramonet, *My Life*, trans. by Andrew Hurley (London: Allen Lane, 2007), pp. 405–410.

16. On the Ford-Castro talks, see, for example, Peter Kornbluh and James G. Blight, "Dialogue with Castro: A Hidden History," *The New York Review of Books*, 6 October 1994, pp. 47–54.

17. Handwritten note on Moyers's conversation with Castro. For Cuban involvement in Africa, see Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959–1976* (Chapel Hill:

Whether Moyers's handwritten note accurately reflects what the Cuban leader stated is unclear. Moyers went to Cuba to create a documentary for CBS. His personal interest might have colored his report. Regardless of possible misunderstandings, however, Cuban officials repeated that Castro's remarks to Moyers "officially" represented Cuban positions.¹⁸ Moyers's report also had a strong impact on Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, who spent hours debriefing Moyers. "We will carefully study what Bill has reported and be submitting to you shortly a recommended timetable and scenario for opening discussions with the Cuban government," Vance wrote to Carter.¹⁹

Even if Carter found the Cuban leader ready to initiate dialogue, he did not rush to remove the U.S. embargo as Castro requested. Carter's two most influential advisers opposed such a move. National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, the son of a Polish diplomat, believed in exercising power rather than diplomacy when dealing with Communist countries. In contrast, Secretary Vance, a lawyer with a great deal of governmental service, emphasized the importance of diplomacy through his reputation as a skilled negotiator with world leaders including Castro. Despite their ideological differences and backgrounds, both Brzezinski and Vance argued that Carter should wait for a major Cuban concession before lifting the U.S. embargo on Cuba. They believed that negotiations had to be done on a give-and-take basis.²⁰

However, the record of one of the most important top-level meetings on Cuba reveals the discrepancy between Brzezinski's and Vance's views on dialogue. At a crucial meeting in March 1977 on Cuba, all of Carter's chief advisers endorsed a step-by-step approach toward normalization of diplomatic relations whereby the U.S. government would use the U.S. embargo as "a bargaining chip" to extract major concessions from Cuba. Yet, divergent views

University of North Carolina Press, 2002); and Piero Gleijeses, *Visions of Freedom: Havana, Washington, Pretoria, and the Struggle for Southern Africa, 1976–1991* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013). The Cuban regime claims that what the U.S. government calls an "embargo" is a "blockade."

18. See for example, Cyrus Vance to Jimmy Carter, 11 March 1977, in NLC-128-12-6-11-8, JCPL; and Memorandum of Conversation between Terence A. Todman and Pelegrín Torras, 24 March 1977, in NLC-24-10-8-2-3, JCPL.

19. Cyrus Vance to Jimmy Carter, 8 February 1977, in NLC-128-12-5-16-4, JCPL. Weeks later Carter referred to the Moyer-Castro conversations in his talk with Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau. See Memorandum of Conversation between Jimmy Carter and Pierre Trudeau, 22 February 1977, p. 26, in NLC-23-16-4-5-0, JCPL.

20. Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic*, pp. 293–294; and Betty Glad, *An Outsider in the White House: Jimmy Carter, His Advisers, and the Making of American Foreign Policy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), esp. chs. 1–3.

on the question of Africa had already emerged. Referring to Castro's conversation with Moyers, Vance explained that the Cubans wanted to withdraw from Africa even though they held "the theoretical position that they have an inherent right to send troops overseas." Brzezinski was unimpressed. "I greet Castro's blabbing to possibly naïve Americans with some skepticism." Vance responded, "Yes, you may be right. But the only way to prove it is to start talking."²¹

Despite the disagreements, Carter signed Presidential Directive (PD) 6 to approve the dialogue. The document identified five major U.S. goals in Cuba. Of these, the reduction of "Cuba's foreign intervention," the breaking of the "Cuban relationship (political and military) with the Soviet Union," and the demand for "compensation for American expropriated property" were traditional ones. What is noteworthy is that Carter added two more—"combating terrorism" and "human rights"—to the list. These issues were brought up not randomly but because of Carter's resolve to clean up the legacy of Washington's association with the Cuban "counterrevolution." The success of talks depended not only on Cuba's response and U.S. public support for détente but also on the administration's approach to the Cuban-American community.²²

Washington Faces Miami: Human Rights and Terrorism

Recently declassified records reveal that Carter took great care to approach the Cuban-American community. Despite the popular image portrayed in the CBS documentary, the diaspora community's views became more mixed over time. Whereas hardliners and militants kept calling for the overthrow of the Cuban government, a small yet notable number of leftist youths and professionals advocated dialogue with the Cuban government. They came under the strong influence of the civil-rights and antiwar movements in the United States. Between these wings appeared the so-called "moderates," who remained hostile to the government but grudgingly accepted dialogue as a way to achieve important community interests, such as the release of political prisoners in Cuba and the reunification of Cuban families. Yet, when Carter assumed the presidency, most of the moderates remained silent for fear

21. Minutes of Policy Review Committee Meeting 15, "Cuba," 9 March 1977, in NLC-24-61-4-4-0, JCPL.

22. PD 6, 15 March 1977, in JCPL, available online at <http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/documents/pddirectives/pd06.pdf>.

of being labeled pro-Castro, amid a flurry of terrorist threats and political assassinations.²³

Carter allied with the moderates by incorporating their thinking into the U.S. agenda for discussion with Cuba. Alfredo Durán, the chair of the Florida Democratic Party, became an early supporter of Carter during the 1976 presidential election. Despite endorsing liberal programs on domestic issues, Durán opposed negotiations with Castro unless the Cuban regime withdrew its troops from Africa and released political prisoners from jails.²⁴ In response to the Linowitz reports, Durán reportedly said that U.S.-Cuban normalization “would be a tremendous mistake *at this point*.” What he probably meant was that normalization was possible if some conditions were met.²⁵ For his part, Carter visited Durán and his group during the campaign at the editorial office of *Réplica*, a magazine that was set up to counter the far-right-wing newspaper *Patria*.

Durán advised Carter, Vance, and Brzezinski about Miami Cuban opinions in February 1977, explaining that the Cuban-American community was “divided” on the issue of normalization. For some, normalization was simply unacceptable. For others, it would be “a means to reunite families.” Durán then urged Carter to give priority to human rights issues, such as the release of prisoners, family reunification, and visitation rights, over compensation for confiscated U.S. property. In this way, he claimed, Washington could avoid creating the impression that normalization was designed to benefit U.S. business. Carter apparently welcomed this advice.²⁶ For the next few weeks he reiterated the importance of human rights in dealing with Cuba and publicly declared that human rights and Africa were the two most important items on

23. For the views of militants and hardliners, see articles and editorials from the period in *Diario las Américas* (Miami), *Patria* (Miami), and *La nación* (Miami), among others. For moderate and radical views, see *Réplica* (Miami) and *Areito* (New York) respectively. For letters from Cuban Americans calling for family reunification, see also Jorge Roblejo Lorie to Robert A. Pastor, 26 May 1977, [and others], in Folder “Hispanic Issues: Cuban 3/77–8/77,” Box 71, Office of Public Liaison (Costanza), JCPL. See also, García, *Havana USA*, pp. 48, 138–140; Torres, *In the Land of Mirrors*, esp. pp. 92–94; and Arboleya, *Counterrevolution*, ch. 5.

24. See interview with Alfredo Durán, 13 April 2001, *Frontline*, WGBH, Public Broadcasting System, available online at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/elian/interviews/duran.html>. Durán also worked with Bernardo Benes, Manolo Reboso, Manolo Reyes, Max Resnik (editor of *Réplica*), and Maurice Ferré (Puerto Rican mayor of Miami).

25. “US and Cuba at Odds on Pact,” *Miami News*, 21 December 1976, p. 3A; emphasis added. In an interview in Miami on 14 November 2013, Durán told me he had already seen normalization as a way to influence the Cuban system more peacefully and more powerfully.

26. Cyrus Vance to Jimmy Carter, 5 February 1977, in NLC-128-12-5-14-6, JCPL. See also, Memorandum of Conversation between Jimmy Carter and Alfredo Durán, 5 February 1977, in NLC-24-10-7-9-7, JCPL.

the agenda.²⁷ Both Vance and Brzezinski agreed, and the U.S. delegation at the bilateral talks followed this line.²⁸

Carter's human rights concerns also explain his determined efforts to control anti-Castro terrorism. Urged by Durán and his group, Vance strongly demanded that Attorney General Griffin Bell investigate this issue by himself. In the face of Bell's reticence and complaints, Vance kept arguing that the success of U.S.-Cuban détente required the containment of terrorism. Carter's ethics also allowed for little compromise with the inhumane nature of terrorism. When Carter watched the CBS documentary, he was "appalled at the idea that people could use U.S. territory as a base for terrorist action." The U.S. president promptly ordered CIA Director Stansfield Turner to ensure that the agency would never authorize any of the anti-Castro militants' operations. When Carter received a report on anti-Castro terrorism, he stressed to Vance, "We can watch it, not yield to the threat."²⁹

This was easier said than done. On 25 May 1977, anti-Castro militants bombed an office of Mackey Airlines, the first domestic carrier that planned to resume flights to Cuba. The bombing had a chilling effect on other U.S. flight companies, all of which suspended their own plans.³⁰ Carter had difficulty containing terrorism for several reasons. Federal agencies apparently could not prosecute anti-Castro militants because of what they were thinking and speaking—unless they put an idea into practice or violated specific U.S. laws. Tracking terrorist groups posed another problem. Few Cuban Americans on the street were willing to serve as police informants, if only out of fear of retaliation. Moreover, the terrorists moved across the maritime boundaries of several Caribbean countries. The U.S. government had to ensure that its agencies would cooperate with their counterparts abroad.³¹

27. U.S. House Committee on International Relations, *Toward Improved United States-Cuba Relations: Report of a Special Study Mission to Cuba, February 10–15, 1977*, 95th Cong., 1st sess., 23 May 1977, pp. 42, 44; and Carter's remarks, 20 May 1977, in American Presidency Project (APP). See also, Carter, *White House Diary*, p. 62. The transition paper cited in n. 12 *supra* does not mention the human rights issues of Cuban Americans as part of the U.S. objectives.

28. Minute of Policy Review Committee Meeting 15. When Vance sought Carter's authorization of the U.S. agenda for the first talk, Carter corrected the item on human rights; he deleted "US" in "US prisoners" and inserted "all political," noting, "Broader as much as possible." Vance to Carter, 22 March 1977.

29. Minutes of Policy Review Committee Meeting 15; and Robert A. Pastor to James Schechter, 12 January 1978, in NLC-24-75-1-1-1, JCPL; and Handwritten note by Jimmy Carter, enclosed in Cyrus Vance to Jimmy Carter, 7 March 1977, in JCPL.

30. Zbigniew Brzezinski to Jimmy Carter, 20 July 1977, in Folder "Cuba, 5–10/77," Box 13, RNSA, JCPL.

31. On legal constraints on the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), see Griffin Bell to Zbigniew Brzezinski, 8 April 1977, in NLC-24-10-9-2-3, JCPL.

U.S. willingness to curb terrorism was put to the test in the summer of 1977, when the administration learned of a new threat. Carter immediately mobilized federal agencies and provided information to the government of the Bahamas—where the plotters supposedly stored fuel and arms—and to Cuba. The response foiled the plot, but the administration continued to take the issue so seriously that it created an interagency task force to review the procedures for prevention. Vance argued that “simply swapping information may not be sufficient in such volatile situations” and that “thought should be given to expanding present procedures to allow the appropriate agency to take the lead in following events and making recommendations.” Carter supported Vance’s argument: “We need to move on this.” The next day, Carter asked Brzezinski, “What are we doing to control Cuban-U.S. terrorists?” In a memorandum to prepare for Brzezinski’s answer to Carter, Pastor responded, “Not enough.”³²

Castro volunteered to assist Carter. In June 1977, he ordered Néstor García Iturbe, first secretary of the Cuban mission to the United Nations (UN) in New York, to provide U.S. officials with an oral statement on terrorism. The statement detailed a plot against Cuba, including information on the conspirators, their whereabouts, weapons, financial sources, and collaborators in Miami.³³ In doing so, the Cuban authorities admitted that they had deeply infiltrated south Florida, but they indicated a desire to expand counterterrorism cooperation. Later in the message to the U.S. president, Castro promised he would continue to oppose terrorism even though the anti-hijacking agreement had expired. The Cuban leader referred to the large number of Cuban-born residents trained by the CIA as “a monster that has been created [by the U.S. government] and will be extremely difficult to control.”³⁴

These efforts started to bear fruit. On 15 August, U.S. federal and local agents seized three boats and automatic weapons that they claimed would have been used for hit-and-run raiding on Cuba. Washington again informed Havana of the operation, for which Castro expressed his gratitude. By devoting resources, reforming bureaucracies, and cooperating with Cuba and

32. Cyrus Vance to Jimmy Carter, 13 July 1977, in NLC-7-18-5-4-6, JCPL; Handwritten Memorandum, Jimmy Carter to Zbigniew Brzezinski, 14 July 1977, in Folder “Cuba, 5–10/77,” Box 13, RNSA, JCPL; Brzezinski to Carter, 20 July 1977; and Robert A. Pastor to Zbigniew Brzezinski, 20 July 1977, in Folder “Cuba, 5–10/77,” Box 13, RNSA, JCPL.

33. Memorandum of Conversation, 22 July 1977, in NLC-24-65-11-3-9, JCPL. For Cuba’s side, see Néstor García Iturbe, *Diplomacia sin sombra* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 2007), pp. 100–110.

34. Church to Jimmy Carter, Cyrus Vance, and Zbigniew Brzezinski, 12 August 1977, in Folder “Cuba, 5–10/77,” Box 13, RNSA, JCPL.

other Caribbean countries, the administration appeared to eliminate one of the most formidable obstacles to U.S.-Cuban détente, at least for a while.³⁵

Creating a Deadlock over Africa

Despite this important achievement, the U.S.-Cuban dialogue was losing momentum because of the renewed Cold War in Africa. The bilateral talks started in March 1977, and by August the two countries had reached agreement on fisheries and maritime boundaries and the reopening of an interests section—an “embassy in all but name”—in each other’s capital.³⁶ They made other gestures, too. The Carter administration halted SR-71 overflights and lifted the ban on travel by U.S. citizens, and the Cuban government released ten U.S. prisoners and permitted some visits of divided families. But the growing conflicts in Africa complicated matters. Castro stalled the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola, Cuba’s major ally, in response to the increased regional tensions after the Shaba I affair. Angola pleaded with Cuba to defend it against its hostile neighbors, Zaire and South Africa, both of which were allied with the United States.³⁷

This was the context in which Brzezinski reframed the U.S. discussion on Cuba. By then, U.S. policy toward Cuba was essentially part of the U.S. dialogue with Latin America, as advocated by the Linowitz report. But on 3 August 1977, at a pivotal meeting focusing on Cuba, Brzezinski advocated the opposite. He stood against the State Department’s proposal for the partial lifting of the embargo, which aimed to draw Havana’s concessions on human rights. Brzezinski conceded that human rights was important “because it is good in itself; because it is important to the President; and also because it is of great importance to the Cuban American community.” Yet, he insisted that the administration maintain the embargo because it was “the only U.S. leverage” to restrain Cuba’s policy in Africa, which he identified as the single most important U.S. national interest regarding Cuba. Treasury Secretary Michael Blumenthal vehemently contested this far-reaching shift of policy understanding. “Normalization is important not just because of Cuba’s

35. For the FBI’s self-evaluation, see Michael Kelly to Zbigniew Brzezinski, Warren Christopher, and Stansfield Turner, 2 December 1977, in Folder “Cuba 10–12/77,” Box 11, National Security Affairs-North-South (Pastor), JCPL.

36. For the quotation, see Smith, *Closest of Enemies*, p. 114. Although the U.S. and Cuban interests sections already existed in the Swiss and Czech embassies, U.S. and Cuban diplomats began to staff them and reopened the offices in former embassy buildings in Havana and Washington.

37. For the best account of the Shaba I affair, see Gleijeses, *Visions of Freedom*, pp. 39–44.

activities in Africa,” he exclaimed. In the end, however, Brzezinski won the debate. Carter, like Brzezinski, was deeply concerned about Cuba’s roles in Africa. In a conversation with Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere, Carter complained of the continued presence of Cuban troops in Africa, which made it “impossible for us to normalize relations with Cuba.”³⁸

This abrupt change of U.S. policy orientation puzzled Havana. Cuban foreign policy was a matter of national sovereignty, Castro believed. Cuba was defending the existing government in Angola from what Cuban leaders saw as external aggression. Abandoning the Angolan regime for the sake of an improvement of U.S.-Cuban relations was unthinkable, as Castro reassured Angolan President Agostinho Neto.³⁹ For both ideological and nationalist reasons, the Cuban leader believed that his mission in Africa was the right thing to do. Even if that had not been the case, he did not want to create the perception that he was opportunistic and susceptible to U.S. pressure. Castro refused the linkage between his interests in Africa and U.S.-Cuban détente. Both publicly and privately, Castro proclaimed that Cuban solidarity with its African allies was nonnegotiable.⁴⁰ “Cuba is not China,” he said at one point.⁴¹

Carter, however, continued to argue that Cuba should withdraw from Africa to make progress on U.S.-Cuban normalization. When this suasion did not work, Carter tried to generate international pressure on Cuba through negative public relations campaigns.⁴² In November, in a statement for attribution to a “high-ranking Administration official,” Brzezinski told U.S. reporters that a recent military buildup by Cuba in African countries made normalization of relations with Cuba “impossible.” He cited an increase of

38. Vance was absent from the meeting. Blumenthal was a member of the Linowitz commission. Department of State’s Policy Paper, n.d., in NLC-24-17-6-7-4, JCPL; Minutes, Policy Review Committee Meeting, 3 August 1977, in NLC-15-8-1-10-5, JCPL; and Zbigniew Brzezinski to Jimmy Carter, 18 August 1977, in Declassified Documents Reference System (DDRS). On Carter and his advisers, see Carter, *White House Diary*, pp. 11–12, 364, 425. See also, Glad, *An Outsider*, chs. 1–3. For Carter’s concern, see Pastor, “The Carter-Castro Years,” pp. 242–243; and Handwritten memorandum by Jimmy Carter, enclosed in Zbigniew Brzezinski to Jimmy Carter, 6 July 1977, in DDRS. For Carter’s comment on Cuba’s intervention in Africa, see Memorandum of Conversation between Jimmy Carter and Julius Nyerere, 4 August 1977, in NLC-133-42-3-20-2, JCPL.

39. Memorandum of Conversation between Fidel Castro and Agostinho Neto, 23 March 1977, in Consejo de Estado (Cuba), Wilson Center Digital Archive (WCDA).

40. For example, see interview with Castro for *Afrique Asie*, 12 May 1977, in *Bohemia* (Havana), 20 May 1977, pp. 58–65.

41. Speech by Fidel Castro, 1 January 1979, in “Discursos e intervenciones del Comandante en Jefe Fidel Castro Ruz, Presidente del Consejo de Estado de la República de Cuba” [Speeches and Statements of the Commander in Chief Fidel Castro Ruz, President of the State Council of the Republic of Cuba] (hereinafter referred to as “Discursos”).

42. Carter, *White House Diary*, p. 134.

4,000 to 6,000 Cuban troops in Angola since July 1978, a figure that turned out to be based on a change in CIA bookkeeping, not an actual increase. Brzezinski's "marked indifference to the facts" irritated Cuban officials.⁴³ Castro later called it "deliberate propaganda," and "this was when the anti-climate in the United States began."⁴⁴ A month later, Castro's rhetoric flared up in a speech. "In the same manner that in the past we fought against five presidents of the United States," he declared, "we will now fight against the sixth." Cuba had already begun to send new troops to the Horn of Africa, this time to defend Ethiopia from invading Somalian armies.⁴⁵

U.S.-Cuban disputes over Africa reached a peak in May 1978, when Carter and Castro engaged in verbal battles over the Shaba II affair. As soon as Castro received news of the intrusion of Angola-based Katangan rebels into Zaire's Shaba province, he conveyed an assurance to Carter that Cuba was not involved. Despite this confidential message, the Carter administration publicly condemned the Cuban presence in Africa as the cause of the incident and denounced the Cuban leader as a liar. Castro shot back, publicly blaming Brzezinski for misleading the U.S. president.⁴⁶ The exchange of accusations did not help to foster U.S. public support for the dialogue. By this time, Carter had become a hostage of his rhetoric, as Wayne Smith notes. The administration "talked so often and in such alarmist terms about the Cubans in Africa . . . that various members of Congress began to demand that something be done." But when nothing happened, "Carter was labeled a wimp."⁴⁷ The process of U.S.-Cuban normalization appeared to stall.

Castro's Overtures and His Vision for Cuba's Economic Future

The disagreements over Africa did not necessarily end the U.S.-Cuban dialogue, however. Castro was not impatient. In his May 1977 interview with

43. Smith, *Closest of Enemies*, pp. 122–127; and Canadian Embassy in Havana to Ottawa, 25 November 1977, in Vol. 12614, File 20-Cuba-1-3, pt. 13, Library and Archives Canada (LAC).

44. Memorandum of Conversation between Fidel Castro, Stansfield Turner, and Robert A. Pastor, 3–4 December 1978, in DDRS.

45. Fidel Castro, *2nd Period of Sessions of the National Assembly of People's Power: City of Havana December 24, 1977, Year of Institutionalization* (Havana: Political Publishers, 1978), p. 66. On Cuban intervention in the Horn of Africa, see Gleijeses, *Visions of Freedom*, pp. 49–53.

46. For the best account of the Shaba II affair and U.S.-Cuban reactions, see Gleijeses, *Visions of Freedom*, pp. 55–60.

47. Smith, *Closest of Enemies*, p. 142.

ABC reporter Barbara Walters, he said that U.S.-Cuban normalization would be difficult and perhaps take until Carter's second term.⁴⁸ For the time being Castro worked to generate favorable audiences in both the United States and Cuba. He invited journalists, business groups, and politicians to Havana and talked with many of them personally. The Cuban interests section in Washington was developing relations with Congress, businesses, the press, academics, and influential private citizens. Castro also sought to prepare the Cuban public for eventual U.S.-Cuban normalization. "Imperial aggression strengthened revolutionary spirit in Cuba," he said in one of the speeches, "but the Cuban Revolution would not need imperialist aggression to survive."⁴⁹

Havana's most far-reaching move on this front was its outreach to the Cuban-American community. Carter's initial policy amplified expectation among Miami moderates that U.S.-Cuban dialogue might result in the release of prisoners in Cuba and reunification of Cuban families. Searching for their identity and cultural origins, young radicals and professionals traveled to Cuba for three weeks, with the consent of the Cuban government. Castro entertained the group of 55 Cuban émigrés, the Brigade Antonio Maceo, and allowed their documentary, *55 Hermanos*, to be shown at Cuban theaters, which drew record crowds. "Scenes of young exiles returning to their childhood rooftop playgrounds and neighborhoods warmed the hearts of a public that until then had been publicly encouraged to despise those who had left," according to a participant of the brigade. "Audiences left the theaters crying."⁵⁰

Behind the scenes, Castro opened secret channels with Bernardo Benes, a Jewish banker of Cuban origin in Miami. Benes did not hold an official title in the Carter administration, but he belonged to Durán's group and saw the dialogue with Castro as the only way to solve human rights problems in Cuba. In August 1977, he had a chance encounter with José Luis Padrón, executive assistant to the Cuban first vice minister of internal affairs. Alberto Pons, a friend of Panamanian Vice President Ricardo de la Espriella, who knew that both Benes and Padrón were in Panama and arranged their meeting in the hope of improving U.S.-Cuban relations. After this meeting Benes decided to act as a private intermediary between Washington and Havana, and he recruited his friend Charles Dascal to join him. In contrast to Brzezinski,

48. *Entrevista Concedida por el Comandante en Jefe Fidel Castro a la Periodista Norteamericana Barbara Walters, 19 de Mayo de 1977* (Havana: Oficina de Publicaciones del Consejo de Estado, 1977).

49. Speech by Fidel Castro, 28 September 1977, in *Bohemia* (Havana), 7 October 1977, pp. 50–59.

50. Torres, *In the Land of Mirrors*, p. 93. On this trip, see Roman de la Campa, "Itinerario de la Brigada Antonio Maceo," *Areíto*, Vol. 4, Nos. 3–4 (Spring 1978), pp. 12–23.

Benes and Dascal were more interested in the well-being of the prisoners than in Cuban interventions in Africa.⁵¹

Of special importance was the first meeting Benes and Dascal had with Castro, in Havana in February 1978. Castro responded to their concerns by promising to examine the plight of prisoners as well as the issue of family reunification. He expressed interest in opening clandestine channels of communication with Carter. Castro repeated that Carter was a moral, decent person with religious convictions and emphasized the importance of sitting down with him before his term ended. The meeting lasted more than seven hours and impressed not only the visitors but also Cuban officials. “Unprecedented [*sic*]—180 degrees change of position regarding Cuban Community abroad and U.S.,” Padrón dictated to Benes after the meeting. “[I have] never heard him talk to strangers in such a candid and open way—economic development, commercial and trade relations—tell Dr. Breszinsky [*sic*] this is the Cuban NEP [New Economic Policy] of [Vladimir] Lenin.”⁵²

According to Padrón, who became a special envoy for Castro thereafter, the meeting was the first time he and other Cuban officials learned about Castro’s new vision for the Cuban economy. The timing was crucial and came nearly five years before Decree No. 82, issued in 1982, which approved foreign capital investment. “I think it was extremely important,” Padrón says, that Castro was ready to adjust the Cuban economic system in response to the changing relations with the United States, while considering new scenarios and new interests. Benes and Dascal also played a critical role in giving Castro a new perspective on the Cuban-American community, which, according to Padrón, “none of us [Cuban leaders] had.” Dascal spoke frankly to the Cuban leader: “Fidel, you are betting for the losing chicken, the Soviet Union.” He explained how a Cuban émigré who had arrived with 50 pesos in the United States had become one of its richest men in twenty years.⁵³

Out of his desire to tell a real story about Miami, Benes later produced a TV documentary on the political, economic, and cultural accomplishments of the Cuban community in Miami. The video astonished Castro. When an announcer introduced a Cuban-American shoe factory producing 60,000 shoes a day, Castro jumped up and said, “Benes, this is wrong. This should be sixty

51. José Luis Padrón, interview record, Havana, 10 February 2010, in author’s possession. Padrón finds Levine’s version of the first encounter false. Havana also tried to recruit Durán, but Washington stopped his visit to Havana for fear of publicity. Alfredo Durán, interview, Miami, 18 September 2013.

52. Benes, “Mis conversaciones,” pp. 12–19; Benes’s note, “First Meeting of Bernardo Benes with Fidel Castro in Havana, Cuba,” in Folder “Dialogue, n.d., 1977–1979,” Box 2, Mirta Ojito Papers, UM-CHC. A partial version of this meeting appears in Levine, *Secret Missions*, pp. 91–92.

53. Padrón, interview record, 4 November 2013, p. 8.

thousand a year.” Benes responded, “No, Fidel. It is sixty thousand pairs of shoes a day, as the announcer says.” For a while, Castro found it difficult to grapple with what he had watched. “This is a million of Cubans who left for the north in a mess, for the country whose culture was different and foreign, for the country that was discriminatory and capitalist. Look [at] what they have done!”⁵⁴

Some Cuban officials like Padrón appreciated Benes’s and Dascal’s roles because of their concerns about Cuba’s economic future. “I was very critical of the economic scheme that was predominant in Cuba at that moment,” Padrón recalled in an interview. The Cuban economy was “almost carbon copy of the Soviet system,” and “I was convinced that would not develop the country.” Padrón looked for new ideas and found two sources of inspiration: the Jews and the Palestinians. Both had benefited from political and economic ties to their diasporas. “So I said, well, we had a nation, we had a state. Why could not we do the same?” Castro seemed to agree with him. The Cuban leader appointed Padrón as Cuba’s minister of tourism, allowing him to set up a new corporation, CIMEX, for which the government would seek to attract foreign capital.⁵⁵ Later, the Cuban leader himself told Benes that Cuba’s priority was to promote détente with the West and establish “a new order of economic development.”⁵⁶

Alpha Channel

The Carter administration was ambivalent about the private diplomacy undertaken by Benes and Dascal and Castro’s interest in the opening of a secret U.S.-Cuban communication. After Brzezinski received Havana’s messages through Benes and Dascal, he sent his deputy David Aaron to meet Padrón in New York on 14 April 1978.⁵⁷ Unlike Benes and Dascal, Brzezinski and Aaron had far less interest in human rights issues than in Cuba’s military operations

54. Benes, “Mis conversaciones,” pp. 42–44. Padrón frankly confirmed this story. See Padrón, interview record, 4 November 2013, pp. 2, 6. A similar story appears in Levine, *Secret Missions*, p. 99, although the author does not mention some critical elements.

55. Padrón, interview record, 4 November 2013, p. 4. Padrón discussed the idea of mixed industry with Benes and Dascal in Mexico City in late March. Benes, “Mis conversaciones,” pp. 99–103. Dascal viewed Padrón as one of the pragmatic and open-minded Cubans who wanted to change the course of Cuba’s economic future. See Dascal to Zbigniew Brzezinski, n.d., in Folder “Cuba, 2/78–4/78,” Box 10, ZBC-GE, JCPL.

56. Benes, “Mis conversaciones,” p. 116.

57. Zbigniew Brzezinski to David Aaron, 27 March 1978, in Folder “Cuba, 2/78–4/78,” Box 10, GE, ZBC, JCPL.

in Africa. “I will suggest to Padrón that the Cubans are being exploited by the Soviets in Africa,” Aaron told Brzezinski a day before the meeting.⁵⁸ When Aaron fulfilled his promise, Padrón gave him a frank response. “You’re not well informed,” he said. “We believe that sometimes the United States underestimates the character, the position, and the influence of Cuba in Africa.” The talks made clear the degree of misperception, although they agreed to continue to talk.⁵⁹

In contrast, Vance and others at the State Department paid more attention to human rights issues and were more receptive to the idea of resuming U.S.-Cuban talks. According to William LeoGrande and Peter Kornbluh, the Cubans found the New York meeting so unsatisfactory that they asked Benes and Dascal to contact the State Department. At their meeting with Vance, Benes and Dascal found him more amicable, engaging, and interested in their account than Brzezinski had been. Whereas Brzezinski cut them out of communication, Vance even assigned his top aide, Peter Tarnoff, as their contact person.⁶⁰ Appealing to human rights concerns, Vance then persuaded Carter to open “Alpha Channel,” a top-secret channel with Havana. In subsequent months, U.S. and Cuban delegations met in New York, Washington, Atlanta, Cuernavaca (Mexico), and Havana.⁶¹

In New York on 15 June and in Washington on 6 July, U.S. and Cuban representatives exchanged views about Africa and human rights. Talks about the latter went smoothly. In light of Castro’s conversation with Benes and Dascal, Padrón stated, Havana had already decided to release hundreds of prisoners and authorize their departure with their families from Cuba. This new initiative would help to “improve the climate between the U.S. Cuban community and Cuba” and “create a propitious climate in U.S. public opinion.”⁶² The State Department welcomed this move, showing its willingness to accept these Cubans and process their visa applications. But Brzezinski doubted Castro’s intentions, suspected Vance’s naiveté, and instructed the U.S. delegation

58. David Aaron to Zbigniew Brzezinski, 13 April 1978, in DDRS.

59. Memorandum of Conversation between José Luis Padrón and David Aaron, 14 April 1978, in Folder “Cuba 2/78–4/78,” Box 10, GF, ZBC, JCPL.

60. LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel*, pp. 184–185; and Levine, *Secret Missions*, pp. 97–99.

61. Almost all memoranda of conversations related to this series of meetings were recently declassified. Partial stories appear in Levine, *Secret Missions*; Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic*; Gleijeses, *Visions of Freedom*; and LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel*. Yet little has been mentioned about the Atlanta meeting, the most important of all. Padrón claimed in an interview that the Soviet Union knew nothing about this channel. See Padrón, interview record, 10 February 2010, p. 9. On Carter’s decision, see David Engstrom’s interview with Peter Tarnoff, 20 July 1988, p. 4, in author’s possession.

62. Memorandum of Conversation between David Newsom and José Luis Padrón, 15 June 1978, in DDRS.

not to discuss “any bilateral issues.” In that way, Washington would not have to reciprocate Havana’s concessions on human rights.⁶³

Then came the meeting in Atlanta on 8 August 1978. By then the Cuban regime’s expectation of better U.S.-Cuban relations had increased to one of its highest points. Unlike the previous meeting in New York with Aaron, Padrón found the meeting in Washington with Vance’s assistant David Newsom very satisfactory. “This is as if a man who could not speak for twenty years,” he described to Benes, “suddenly started to speak words like ‘dad,’ ‘mom,’ and ‘honey (nené).’”⁶⁴ Their enthusiasm waned when they found that the U.S. government was discouraging fifteen countries from attending the Non-Aligned Movement summit to be held in Havana. In a major speech on 26 July, Castro engaged in a diatribe against U.S. imperialism, ridiculed Carter’s human rights policy, and condemned U.S. support for Nicaragua, Chile, and other undemocratic regimes conducting “genocide” and torture.⁶⁵ Padrón admitted that the speech was acrimonious but sent messages to Carter through Benes that Cuba looked to the meeting in Atlanta as “very important” and expected that Washington would reciprocate Havana’s concessions.⁶⁶

The Atlanta meeting was a big disappointment for the Cubans. In response to Castro’s speech of 26 July, David Aaron opened the meeting by citing Carter’s comment about the Cubans: “Are they really serious?” This question infuriated the Cuban delegation.⁶⁷ Neither were they pleased to hear again the U.S. position that Cuba should withdraw from Africa and end criticism of the United States on such matters as Puerto Rico. Padrón reiterated that policy in Africa was non-negotiable. The Cuban troops came at the request of Angola, he said. Unless the United States gave a security guarantee to Angola from the external danger of South Africa, Angola would not ask the Cubans to leave. Newsom called the meeting “disappointing,” but the U.S. delegation made matters even worse for their Cuban counterpart by cutting the session in half. When Padrón requested that they talk about the blockade and Guantánamo on the Cuban agenda, the U.S. delegation refused to

63. Zbigniew Brzezinski to Jimmy Carter, 7 July 1978, in Folder “Cuba—Alpha Channel [6/78–10/78],” Box 10, ZBC-GE, JCLP. On the State Department–National Security Council rivalry on Cuban issues around this time, see Gleijeses, *Visions of Freedom*, pp. 120–122.

64. Benes, “Mis conversaciones,” p. 122.

65. Castro also claimed that the United States repeatedly violated human rights principles by dropping nuclear bombs in Japan, by intervening militarily in Latin America, and by assassinating millions of Vietnamese. See the speech by Fidel Castro, 26 July 1978, in “Discursos.”

66. Benes, “Mis conversaciones,” pp. 126–128; and Peter Tarnoff to Cyrus Vance, 3 August 1978, in DDRS.

67. Levine, *Secret Missions*, pp. 101–104; and Benes, “Mis conversaciones,” p. 133.

comment. The discussion had entered a vicious cycle. Padrón denounced the meeting as “one-sided.”⁶⁸

Back in Havana, Benes saw Castro losing patience. Cuba had already released more than 1,000 prisoners. Although Castro still wanted to bring the U.S. delegation to Havana to expedite U.S.-Cuban talks, he also quipped that Carter did little to reciprocate his gesture. “Everything has been unilateral,” the Cuban leader said. “We want to work constructively. But if they fuck us, we shall fuck them twenty-four hours a day! We are willing to talk about anything, but in an atmosphere of decorum. We will not stand to be humiliated!” Fidel repeatedly said, “Cuba will not deal with the United States with concessions or conditions!”⁶⁹

Benes thought the misunderstanding arose from cultural differences between the United States and Cuba. To the Cubans, Castro’s vitriolic attacks on the United States in his public speeches simply reflected his trademark revolutionary zeal. To U.S. officials, these criticisms of Yankee imperialism during negotiation periods not only increased the political cost of the dialogue but also indicated a lack of sincerity on the part of Cuba.⁷⁰ This observation has merit but it is also undeniable that Washington and Havana confronted a security dilemma in southern Africa. As Piero Gleijeses notes, Carter failed to restrain South Africa, which exacerbated the regional tensions and threatened Angola. Even if Cuba wanted to reduce troops in Angola, South African intransigence made this impossible.⁷¹ The U.S.-Cuban talks became more complicated after Castro initiated a dialogue with the Cuban-American community.

The Entangled Triangle: Havana, Miami, and Washington

On 6 September 1978, Castro surprised the world media by inviting Cuban émigrés to the *Diálogo*, a dialogue for national reconciliation among Cubans at home and abroad. The *Diálogo* planned to address not only the release

68. Memorandum of Conversation between David Aaron, David Newsom, José Luis Padrón, and José Antonio Arbesú, 8 August 1978, in NLC-24-12-2-9-1, JCPL.

69. Benes, “Mis conversaciones,” pp. 134–136, 141–142, 144. Benes met Castro a week after the Atlanta meeting.

70. Levine, *Secret Missions*, pp. 103–104.

71. Gleijeses, *Visions of Freedom*, p. 113. See also, Memorandum of Conversation between David Aaron, David Newsom, José Luis Padrón, and José Antonio Arbesú, 1 November 1978, in Folder “Cuba—Alpha Channel [11/78],” in Box 10, ZBC-GE, JCPL.

of thousands of Cuban prisoners convicted of political crimes but also the reunification of Cuban families separated by the Florida Straits for twenty years. Havana's decision was transcendent. For years Castro and millions of Cubans had vilified Cuban Americans as *gusanos* (worms) because they left the island at difficult times after the revolution. Now, however, the Cuban leader referred to them as members of the "Cuban community abroad" and expressed his regret at having earlier used the insulting term. He argued that the past was the past. "For the first time in almost twenty years," he claimed, "we are willing to talk with personalities of the Cuban community abroad."⁷²

Castro's September 1978 press conference startled U.S. officials, even though they had received prior notice. Tarnoff rushed to call Benes and asked why Castro had created a new crisis by going public. Tarnoff feared that the Cuban leader's actions would force Washington to start to discuss U.S.-Cuban issues in public just before the November midterm election. Benes reminded him that the conference was merely symbolic. But soon Washington concluded that Castro was using new pressure tactics to make the United States commit to negotiations.⁷³

The Cuban authorities tried to assure U.S. officials that the dialogue was intended only "to make the community more amicable, less hostile."⁷⁴ Indeed, from the start of U.S.-Cuban talks, it was Carter who had encouraged Castro to improve relations with Miami. So why did Castro go public when he did? Padrón maintains that the Cuban government wanted to engage in the battle for the hearts and minds of Cubans abroad. But not all Cuban leaders at home were convinced. Many Cubans could not forgive those who had left. Much like Miami Cubans, Havana Cubans had many disagreements among themselves. "These disagreements appeared discreetly and subtly, if not openly, in front of Fidel Castro," Padrón recalls.⁷⁵ Castro had to persuade Cubans both inside and outside Cuba. Six weeks later, when the first group of 48 prisoners left Cuba, Castro stated, "Please do not think that this was easy for us. For us this was also a brave gesture because we have had to explain to the [Cuban] people, who have spent twenty years fighting and holding that way of thinking." He added, "If they do not understand, this is a failure."⁷⁶

72. Press conference by Fidel Castro, 6 September 1978, in *Diálogo del gobierno cubano y personas representativas de la comunidad cubana en el exterior* (Havana: Editora Política, 1994), p. 12.

73. Benes, "Mis conversaciones," pp. 144–146; and Peter Tarnoff to Zbigniew Brzezinski, 13 September 1978, in DDRS.

74. Benes, "Mis conversaciones," pp. 155–157.

75. José Luis Padrón, interview record, 4 November 2013, p. 2.

76. Quoted in Ramírez Cañedo and Morales, *De la confrontación*, p. 171.

After the Atlanta meeting, however, the U.S. government found it difficult to believe that Cuba was acting in good faith. Cuba was trying to move faster exactly when the United States tried to slow down the pace of negotiations. The United States had many other pressing foreign policy issues to attend to, such as Vietnam, China, Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT), and the Middle East. At the interagency meeting on 22 August 1978, the NSC's Aaron reminded the participants that Carter "wants to be careful not to overload the circuits." With the 1978 midterm election approaching, the NSC and State Department decided to conduct a broader analysis of U.S.-Cuban relations and the domestic political impact.⁷⁷

Equally instructive is the Carter administration's reading of reactions in Miami to the *Diálogo*. Many Miami Cubans reacted enthusiastically to Castro's invitation. Unaware of the existing secret U.S.-Cuban talks, they thought negotiations with Castro were the only path to break an impasse in which thousands of Cuban prisoners stayed behind bars and tens of thousands of families remained separated.⁷⁸ Yet, working with Castro was still unthinkable for many militants and hardliners. "Talk with Castro . . . is politically absurd," Mas Canosa wrote. He claimed that the release of prisoners had nothing to do with the *Diálogo*; it was a gesture to Carter. He urged his readers not to succumb to "emotional impulse" and "fall into Castro's ploy."⁷⁹

Despite this mixed feedback, U.S. officials were impressed by the emerging dynamic that increased pressure on the seemingly inactive administration. Citing an example of Jewish-Israeli relations, Tarnoff wrote to Brzezinski that the Cuban-American community might become a pressure group calling for new steps toward U.S.-Cuban normalization. In line with this argument, Tarnoff hinted at a growing discrepancy between the national interest and Cuban-American interests for the foreseeable future:

The time may come when they will want to move ahead faster than will suit our purpose. . . . But even should they begin to get ahead of us, this should not prove a serious problem. As a pressure group, the relatively small Cuban American community has definite limits. We move ahead in opening the normalization

77. Memorandum of Conversation between Warren Christopher and David Aaron, esp. pp. 3, 23 August 1978, in NLC-15-60-2-2-5, RAC, JCPL.

78. García, *Havana USA*, pp. 47–48; Torres, *In the Land of Mirrors*, pp. 94–95; and "Many Cuban Exiles Now Favor Contact with Castro," *The Washington Post*, 24 October 1978, p. A13.

79. *Diario Las Américas* (Miami), 14 September 1978, in *Jorge Mas Canosa en busca de una Cuba libre: Edición completa de sus discursos, entrevistas y declaraciones, 1962–1997* (Coral Gables, FL: North-South Center Press, University of Miami, 2003), Vol. 1, pp. 333–334.

process despite their objections; we should be able to control its pace even should they urge a faster one.⁸⁰

The administration soon found the growing desires for change among thousands of Cubans and Cuban Americans uncontrollable.

Many Consequences of the Diálogo

Havana's ill-timed gesture ended up reinforcing suspicion rather than good feelings in Washington. At the Cuernavaca meeting on 28 October 1978, the U.S. and Cuban delegations again exchanged views on Africa but failed to break the impasse. The Cubans stressed the release of prisoners and the effort to improve their relations with the Cuban-American community as proof of their seriousness regarding the dialogue with the United States. Padrón reminded the U.S. delegation of the dialogue's significance:

You have always told us that this [Cuban Americans' attitude toward Cuba] was a very important factor in allowing any U.S. administration to improve relations. We concur with this and feel that a hostile Cuban community in the U.S. is useful neither to the U.S. nor Cuba. We, therefore, determined that it was prudent, appropriate and advisable for us to improve relations with the Cuban community.

The U.S. delegation disappointed Padrón by sticking to the same point that it would consider the lifting of the embargo only after Cuban troops left Africa. The U.S. delegates adhered to Brzezinski's line that the presence of Cuban troops in Africa was far more important than human rights in Cuba.⁸¹ Washington's fixation on Cuba's ties to the Soviet Union was so great that it occasionally misread intelligence reports. In November 1978, the U.S. government dramatized the Soviet upgrading of MiG-23s on the island and resumed SR-71 surveillance flights over Havana.⁸²

Still, the United States and Cuba continued to be in contact. In a report to Carter on foreign policy priorities for 1979, Vance insisted that normalization of relations with traditional anti-U.S. countries remained a U.S. goal,

80. Tarnoff to Brzezinski, 13 September 1978.

81. Memorandum of Conversation between Aaron, Newsom, Padrón, and Arbesú, 1 November 1978. See also Pastor, "The Carter-Castro Years," p. 246.

82. For this controversy, see Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic*, pp. 328–330. Carter wrote in his diary that the whole incident "was being made out of a molehill." Carter, *White House Diary*, p. 262.

part of the U.S. effort to stabilize the international system, expand U.S. influence in the world, and counter the Soviet Union's power. Carter still probably saw merit in such arguments, although he wrote in the margin of the memorandum, "Status quo on Cuba."⁸³ Neither did Castro foresee any immediate hope for progress in U.S.-Cuban dialogue, but he, too, wanted to avoid any backsliding. Writing to Carter, the Cuban leader conveyed his wish to pursue links with the Cuban-American community and maintain U.S.-Cuban cooperation on issues of mutual interest, including the exchange of information on terrorists. "[That's] ok to me," Carter responded.⁸⁴

In the absence of Washington's outright opposition, Havana continued to forge links with Miami. The Cuban government initially allowed Benes to assemble a broad range of people as community representatives, but when his recruitment did not go well amid the flurry of bomb threats, the Cubans started to contact "all of those who had expressed a willingness to participate in this dialogue."⁸⁵ In late November, the Committee of 75 (so named because at a certain point it had 75 members) attended its first meeting with Castro in Havana. At the end of this discussion, Castro announced he would free 3,600 prisoners from Cuban jails, permit these Cubans, as well as thousands more former prisoners and their families, to leave the island, grant émigrés permission to visit their families in Cuba, and promise further consideration of other matters of interest for the community abroad. The announcement was "window-dressing." Benes, Dascal, and Castro had already worked out all the details.⁸⁶

Castro underscored Carter's contribution to his decision, but Havana's move puzzled Washington. The number of former prisoners allowed to leave Cuba far exceeded the number the U.S. government could accept during an economic recession. The U.S. Justice Department's reluctance and slow pace in processing the entry of Cuban prisoners upset both the Cuban government and the Committee of 75.⁸⁷ In the face of Cuban-American pressure, Bell later agreed to accelerate the processing, but the problems remained unresolved for

83. Cyrus Vance to Jimmy Carter, n.d., in Folder "State Department Evening Report, 1/79," Box 39, PE JGPL.

84. Vance to Carter, 22 March 1979.

85. Benes, "Mis conversaciones," p. 151; and "Cuba Selects Exile Leaders for 'Dialogue,'" *Miami News*, 6 November 1978, p. 1A. Some rejected the offer, and others made no response. The case of Durán is noteworthy. He wanted to join the *Diálogo*, but Carter's officials again stopped him due to their fear of its political impact. Durán was too close to Carter. Alfredo Durán, interview, Miami, 14 November 2013.

86. Acta Final, 8 December 1978, in *Diálogo*, pp. 112–117; and Levine, *Secret Missions*, p. 111.

87. Smith, *Closest of Enemies*, pp. 158–159.

over a year, until Carter personally intervened.⁸⁸ For the time being, thousands of ex-prisoners had to endure stigmatization for their involvement in the U.S.-led counterrevolutionary plots and were incapable of securing a job. Concerned about their plight, Cuban émigrés—regardless of their stance on U.S.-Cuban normalization—demanded that Carter take “moral responsibility” in the name of “human rights.”⁸⁹ By this time U.S. officials like Pastor were interpreting Havana’s rapid release of prisoners as a deliberate attempt to embarrass Washington. “We have allowed Castro,” he lamented, “to make a Carter victory seem like a Castro triumph and a Carter failure.”⁹⁰ The CIA reported that Havana’s true purpose was to “neutralize that group [Cuban Americans] as an obstacle to normalization and, ideally, to encourage leaders of the community to criticize U.S. policy toward Cuba.”⁹¹

This line of argument presumably stemmed from the fact that Castro had enunciated similar positions to Miami on the issue of emigration. In a speech before the Committee of 75, Castro said “the U.S. government had a moral obligation of receiving these prisoners, who had families or friends, or who acted here under the influence of the U.S. government.”⁹² He repeated the same view at the secret U.S.-Cuban talks on 3–4 December 1978, when he received U.S. officials for the first time in Havana. Castro took an aggressive stance at this meeting. “We are not negotiating these things [Cuban policies in Africa] to get you to lift the blockade,” he said. “You were the ones who linked the two problems, not we.” Referring to the U.S. embargo on medicine and food, Castro insisted that it was “in complete opposition to President Carter’s human right policy. . . . History will bear witness to your shame.” On his return, Pastor wrote to Carter, “As he [Castro] spoke . . . we were viewing a man who had bottled up 20 years of rage and was releasing it in a controlled but extremely impassioned manner.”⁹³

88. Jimmy Carter to Griffin Bell, 10 August 1979, in Folder “Cuba 7–8/79,” Box 14, RNSA, JCPL; Benjamin Civiletti to Jimmy Carter, 16 August 1979, in Folder “Cuba 7–8/79,” Box 14, RNSA, JCPL; Robert A. Pastor to Zbigniew Brzezinski, 17 August 1979, in Folder “Cuba 7–8/79,” Box 14, RNSA, JCPL; and Zbigniew Brzezinski to Jimmy Carter, 17 August 1979, in Folder “Cuba 7–8/79,” Box 14, RNSA, JCPL.

89. Bernardo Benes and Alfredo Durán to Phil Wise, 21 September 1979, in DDRS; and Torres, *In the Land of Mirrors*, p. 97.

90. Robert A. Pastor to Zbigniew Brzezinski, 4 May 1979, in DDRS.

91. CIA, “The Cuban Foreign Policy,” 21 June 1979, in NLC-6-14-1-2-7, JCPL.

92. Remark by Fidel Castro, 22 November 1978, in *Diálogo*, p. 103.

93. Peter Tarnoff and Robert A. Pastor to Jimmy Carter, “Our Trip to Cuba, December 2–4, 1978,” n.d., in DDRS. Gleijeses’s *Visions of Freedom* covers the part of the conversation on Africa.

This was true except for the last third of the conversation. Castro completely changed his attitude once the talks shifted to the topic of prisoners. He used the words, “*por favor*” (please), twice, to ask the U.S. government to take all Cubans who wanted to go to the United States. His main concerns were about “ex-prisoners,” the Cubans who had been set free prior to 1 August 1978, when the U.S. and Cuban governments reached an agreement. Tarnoff explained that the U.S. government gave priority to the current political prisoners and would accept up to 3,500 of them. The ex-prisoners had to apply for immigration visas through normal channels and wait until their turn came. Castro urged them to reconsider their position. “Here I am acting as their attorney. . . . Some have undergone social adaptation, and for others it was more difficult. . . . If the United States had not supported the counterrevolution, very few people would have gotten involved.” The current number did not cover these ex-prisoners, “but we would ask you to please take the others [ex-prisoners] into account.”⁹⁴

When this plea did not work, Castro raised a question: “If they leave this country illegally, will you take them?” When Tarnoff gave no clear answer, Castro then issued a warning:

So, you are going to be leaving us a lot of ex-prisoners. You’ll be saying it is our fault. But I’d ask you to consider the illegal departure cases. For a while the U.S. was welcoming them, encouraging them, but if you refuse to take them now, they will all try to leave.⁹⁵

Castro clearly was intending to convey the message that migration problems would be matters of concern not only for Cuba but also for the United States. This warning should have set off alarm bells in Washington. Indeed, many ex-prisoners reportedly spoke about repeating the Camarioca boatlift of 1965, when roughly 5,000 Cubans were brought by their families from the island to the United States.⁹⁶

Starting from January 1979, the release of prisoners was no longer the only consequence of the *Diálogo* that caused a problem for the Cuban government. Castro allowed Cuban families abroad to visit the island to address humanitarian needs and isolate his enemies abroad. In the middle of envisioning a new economy, the Cuban authorities no doubt viewed the visits as a source of foreign currency and encouraged visitors to spend money in Cuba.

94. Memorandum of Conversation between Castro, Tarnoff, and Pastor, 3–4 December 1978, pp. 32–33.

95. *Ibid.*, pp. 36, 39.

96. “The New Cuban Exodus,” *The Miami Herald*, 10 December 1978, pp. 1A, 18A.

Vaguely aware of such a calculation, anti-Castro militants and hardliners tried to discourage émigrés from traveling to Cuba. However, many émigrés, especially those who had left parents, siblings, and children behind, did not want to miss this chance to see them for the first time in years. As historian María Cristina García puts it, “family now took precedence over political ideologies.” Despite the increasingly hostile bilateral relations, more than 100,000 Cuban Americans visited their families in Cuba as a result of the *Diálogo*, allowing the Cuban government to earn \$150 million.⁹⁷

However, the result of this massive family reunification ultimately exceeded Havana’s calculation because it stimulated discontent in Cuba. For those who had already lost any affection for the Cuban government, tales of the United States pointed at an alternative way of life. A disgruntled young Cuban girl later wrote in her memoir,

Contrary to what I had been taught in school about the ways of capitalism, my uncles explained that he had medical insurance, so medicines and visits to the doctor were free or cost very little. If his children earned good grades or were excellent athletes, their university education also would be free. No one told him what to do, except his bosses. And if he didn’t like them, he could leave and work elsewhere. He could travel outside the country easily, without having to alert anybody of his intentions. The neighbors didn’t bother him—in fact, he didn’t even know most of his neighbors—and he didn’t have to work for free on Sundays for good of the neighborhood. He tended his own garden and made his own repairs at home. He expected nothing from the community but also was not obliged to do anything for anybody, except obey commonsense rules of civility and the laws of the country.⁹⁸

For these Cubans, the individualistic hope for self-realization came into great conflict with the collective nature of Cuba’s Communist society. Numerous consumer goods that the returning Cubans brought for families, relatives, and friends also might have played a role. The Cuban economy had stagnated since 1976, which made it more difficult for the Cuban government to provide the population with even the most basic items as incentives and rewards for their labor. Castro instead believed in the strength of revolutionary consciousness and austerity among Cubans, and millions of Cubans still had some belief in the Revolution. But the demonstration of newly acquired wealth by Cuban Americans made many in Cuba impatient with political and economic life

97. García, *Havana USA*, pp. 51–54; Wayne Smith, *Closest of Enemies*, pp. 198–199; and Torres, *In the Land of Mirrors*, p. 97.

98. Mirra Ojito, *Finding Mañana: A Memoir of a Cuban Exodus* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005), p. 62.

under Castro. Along with former prisoners and their families, they started to dream of living in the United States.⁹⁹

As Cuban scholar Jesús Arboleya notes, Cuban institutions and societies were unprepared to control what he calls an “emotional clash” and its enormous consequences.¹⁰⁰ Contemporary observers outside Cuba reached the same conclusion. The year 1979 was bad for the Cuban economy. The country faced problems ranging from lower sugar prices, natural disasters, job absenteeism, and the arrival of the baby boomers to the labor force. In a cable to Moscow the Soviet ambassador noted that before the visitors arrived, the Cuban regime had intensified ideological work for the people to prevent unnecessary confusion. Castro himself took time at the Seventh Plenum of the Communist Party’s Central Committee in December 1978 and at a national conference of party leaders in February 1979 to explain why émigrés were being permitted to visit. Likewise, the Communist Party authorized its organizations at local and regional levels to explain to the workers about a new policy toward the Cuban community abroad.¹⁰¹

By late 1979, however, Cuban leaders had to admit the government was facing greater economic woes and social problems at home. Two days after the Ninth Plenum of the Communist Party’s Central Committee in November, Cuba’s First Vice President Raúl Castro (Fidel’s brother) made a major speech about Cuban economic difficulties. He discussed the new emergency plan that would govern the distribution of resources such as food to maintain people’s basic necessities. What impressed foreign observers was his criticism of internal problems rather than external problems such as the U.S. blockade. Raúl Castro even said that Cubans should not use the U.S. blockade as an excuse to ignore their own inefficiency.¹⁰² At the same time, Cuba took various measures, such as a shakeup of leadership, increased neighborhood vigilance and informants, salary reforms, and the opening of free peasant markets. Yet,

99. Torres, *In the Land of Mirrors*, pp. 97–98; Ojito, *Finding Mañana*, pp. 55–56, 62; and José Luis Llovio-Menéndez, *Insider: My Hidden Life as a Revolutionary Cuba*, trans. by Edith Grossman (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1988), pp. 355–356. Cuban newspapers like *Granma* exacerbated the problems by not reporting much on who the visitors were. Even when it reported, the newspaper followed the previously endorsed line of interpretation: Cubans in the United States were suffering from discrimination and unemployment in a racist and unjust capitalist country. See, for example, a typical story in *Granma* (Havana), 5 October 1978, p. 5.

100. Arboleya, *Counterrevolution*, pp. 172–173.

101. USSR Embassy in Cuba, 26 April 1979, in WCDA. See also a report prepared by the Cuba section of the Soviet Institute of Economics of the World Socialist System, 2 January 1980, in Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Noveishei Istorii, Fond 5, Opis’ 77, Delo 639, Listy 1–9, in WCDA. On Cuba’s economic woes, see also Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic*, pp. 349–352.

102. Speech by Raúl Castro, 30 November 1979, in *Granma* (Havana), 1 December 1979, pp. 2–3.

according to the Canadian ambassador, Cuban leaders' rhetoric and actions had "little practical effect."¹⁰³

The impact of *Diálogo* was also palpable across the Florida Straits. Encouraged by these "achievements," radical activists, academics, and those who supported U.S.-Cuban normalization formed a lobbying group to urge U.S. officials to lift the embargo. The group submitted an open letter with 10,000 signatures and surprised U.S. senators and congressional representatives by underscoring the size of the pro-normalization voice in the Cuban-American community.¹⁰⁴ For anti-Castro militants, however, this was a betrayal of their cause. The most notorious group, Omega 7, not only killed two *Diálogo* participants in 1979 but also bombed the buildings of the Soviet and Cuban missions to the UN in New York City. In September 1980, the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation failed to prevent Omega 7 from assassinating Félix García Rodríguez, a diplomat at the Cuban UN mission, even though the agency regarded the group as "the most dangerous terrorist organization" in the United States and had placed the "highest priority" on arresting its members.¹⁰⁵

In between the radicals and militants were ordinary Cuban Americans, who generally hardened their anti-Castro feelings. Despite Havana's efforts to attenuate such hostility, the major achievements of the *Diálogo*—the release of prisoners and family reunification—appeared to have produced the opposite result at least over the short span. Once the former prisoners arrived in Miami, most of them criticized the Cuban leaders who had imprisoned them. Many Florida-to-Cuba visitors felt "exploited" during their visits to the homeland because the Cuban government had called them "tourists" and charged "outrageous prices" for airfares and hotel accommodations. Further, many visitors returned with tales of the "poor life" in Cuba and were renewed in their desire to bring their families and friends to the United States. Unable to comprehend or unwilling to accept Havana's emphasis on collectivism rather than individual access to consumer items, many of the visitors were shocked by the living standards of Cubans on the island. This experience strengthened their

103. Canadian diplomats closely followed these Cuban campaigns. See, for example, Canadian Embassy in Havana to Ottawa, 4 December 1979, 14 December 1979, 17 December 1979, 20 December 1979, 23 January 1980, and 1 February 1980—all in Vol. 18508, File 20-Cuba-1-4, Part 9, RG25, LAC.

104. Cuban American Committee for the Normalization of Relations with Cuba to Cyrus Vance, 16 May 1979, in Folder "96th-1st-1979 International Relations, Cuba," Box 2480, Dante Fascell Papers, University of Miami's Special Collection. See also, *Aretto* 5, No. 19–20 (1979), pp. 7–8.

105. Robin Herman, "'Highest Priority' Given by U.S. to Capture of Anti-Castro Group," *The New York Times*, 3 March 1980, A1; and Torres, *In the Land of Mirrors*, pp. 98–102.

belief in the superiority of the U.S. way of life. What followed were rumors of instability in Cuba rather than a perception of a strong consolidation of the Communist regime. Anti-Castro groups such as Abdala, Alpha 66, and Brigade 2506 grew energized. Abdala even started to exploit family visits to send letters and activists to Cuba to mount propaganda campaigns on the island.¹⁰⁶

It was against this background that Castro declared war on the decay of the Cuban Revolution. In his December 1979 speech before the last session of Cuba's National Assembly of Popular Power, the Cuban leader claimed that attacks against the integrity of revolutionary cadres were Cuba's greatest national security threat. He warned against "counterrevolutionaries," who were taking advantage of these economic and social difficulties and were "trying to sow discord, mistrust, and deviations among the youth, the students, the people, and the intellectual sectors." "Therefore," Castro argued, "the revolution must be firmly vigilant." He announced that the government had begun "the first roundup of criminals," including "the bum, the antisocial, the absentee, the shameless, and the unfulfilled."¹⁰⁷ Castro emphasized that the enemies of the revolution were inside Cubans themselves.

A Clash of Interests

These developments set the stage for the 1980 Mariel migration crisis, but none was more important than Washington's intensifying hostility toward Cuba. U.S. officials grew too preoccupied with Cuban foreign policy to stay focused on the Florida Straits. They continued to dismiss Castro's gesture to the Cuban-American community as pressure tactics and overlooked a major externality of increased people-to-people contacts, which drove ever larger numbers of Cubans to seek another life in the United States.

During the final two years of Carter's presidency, relations between Washington and Havana went from bad to worse. The U.S. perception of Cuban threats grew exponentially, as far-left guerrilla movements armed by Cuba gathered momentum in the Caribbean and Central America. Insurgents aligned with Cuba came to power in Grenada in March 1979 and Nicaragua

106. Torres, *In the Land of Mirrors*, pp. 97, 112; Llovio-Menéndez, *Insider*, pp. 354–355; and Ojito, *Finding Mañana*, p. 168.

107. This speech circulated in the United States and appeared in *World Affairs*, Vol. 143, No. 1 (Summer 1980), pp. 20–64. When Pastor mentioned the speech in one of the meetings, the Cubans did not deny its content.

in July 1979. In addition to revolutionary movements in Latin America, U.S. officials were particularly irritated by Havana's leadership at the Sixth Summit Conference of the Non-Aligned Movement in September 1979. Carter feared that Castro would exploit his presidency of the movement to shift it toward the Soviet bloc. As Cuba's influence grew, Washington recognized Havana as a major rival in the Cold War in Africa, Latin America, and the rest of the Third World. Particularly in Brzezinski's eyes, Cuba symbolized all the problems at home and abroad. "Whether Cuba is acting as a Soviet surrogate, partner, or (in my view least likely) simply dragging the USSR along" did not matter, he wrote to Carter. Cuba "served Soviet interests and created far-reaching problems" by making the administration appear weak at home and abroad.¹⁰⁸ Seeking to discredit Cuba's nationalist status, Brzezinski's NSC repeated requests for intelligence gathering on the island. In particular, the NSC sought information about Cuba's connection with the Soviet Union.

The result was the Soviet brigade crisis, which was to some extent Brzezinski's self-fulfilling prophecy. Once again the administration misread the intelligence reports, mishandled its "new finding," and was overwhelmed by the turn of the events. Although U.S. officials claimed that the Soviet Union had just sent its brigade to Cuba to increase tensions in the Caribbean, this new accusation proved baseless. The Soviet brigade had been in Cuba since 1962. Nonetheless, because the Carter administration demanded Soviet concessions, stopping the anti-Soviet and anti-Cuban campaigns it initiated proved difficult. As Carter notes in his memoir, this was "politically devastating to SALT," the foundation of U.S.-Soviet détente. Moscow even made a face-saving gesture by calling its troops a "training center" instead of a "brigade." But the damage was already done. The U.S. Senate stalled the ratification process of the SALT II treaty.¹⁰⁹

In the wake of the brigade crisis, Carter signed PD52 to "contain Cuba as a source of violent revolutionary change." PD52 marked a major change in U.S. policy toward Cuba. Rather than normalizing relations with Cuba, the U.S. government now pursued a series of hostile measures against the island, including diplomatic offensives against Cuba, the resumption of SR-71

108. Zbigniew Brzezinski to Jimmy Carter, 27 July 1979, in Folder "Weekly Reports 102-120," Box 42, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Subject Files, JCLP. For U.S. views of Cuban roles in Nicaragua and Grenada, see Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic*, pp. 346-349.

109. Carter, *White House Diary*, p. 354; Gleijeses, *Visions of Freedom*, pp. 126-133; and Vitaly Voronnikov, *Gavana—Moskva: Pamyatnye gody* (Moscow: Fond imeni I. D. Sytina, 2001), pp. 69-83. See also, David D. Newsom, *The Soviet Brigade in Cuba: A Study in Political Diplomacy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

reconnaissance flights over Cuba, and planning for military operations around Guantánamo.¹¹⁰ Another pillar of PD52 was to intensify intelligence gathering, briefings for other countries, and public relations campaigns to “put the Cubans on the defensive in the court of world opinion.” In particular, Pastor sought to address Cuba’s economic failures to undermine Cuba’s appeal in developing countries.¹¹¹ East-West détente ended in December 1979 when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. These developments merely reinforced the course of U.S. policy toward Cuba charted in PD52.

It was in this context that ex-prisoners and other desperate people in Cuba rushed into foreign embassies in Havana or hijacked naval vessels to leave the island—incidents that dismayed the Cuban government. In late October, Cubans who hijacked a boat with crew arrived in Miami, received a “heroes’ welcome,” and evaded imprisonment. Three more hijacking incidents ensued, each followed by a Cuban protest. However, U.S. federal authorities arrested none of the hijackers.¹¹² To emphasize the gravity of this matter, Castro publicly issued a warning to Washington on 8 March 1980. “We hope they [the United States] will adopt measures so they will not encourage the illegal departures from the country,” he said, “because we might also have to take measures in this regard.” The Cuban leader hinted that Havana, as it had done during the 1965 Camarioca exodus, would stop restricting the flow of people.¹¹³ Despite these statements, the United States took little action.

U.S. scholars have attributed the Carter administration’s inaction to bureaucratic inertia. Washington was preoccupied with an economic recession, energy crises, Afghanistan, and the Iranian hostage crisis that began in late 1979. Carter paid attention to the hijackings in Cuba but failed to mobilize authorities. Although the U.S. president urged the Justice and State Departments to explore ways to restrict maritime hijackings, the Justice Department claimed that obtaining a conviction was “questionable” in the Southern District of Florida, where judges would likely favor the hijackers and their Cuban-American supporters. Carter nonetheless ordered his officials to examine

110. PD52, 4 October 1979, in Folder “Presidential Directive 41–63,” Vertical File (VF), JCP.L.

111. Part of PD52 remains classified, although U.S. officials have referred to its classified clauses in other, declassified reports. See, for example, Daily Report Item for Jimmy Carter, drafted by Robert A. Pastor, 12 February 1980, in NLC-24-86-5-5-1, RAC, JCP.L; and Stansfield Turner to Zbigniew Brzezinski, 28 February 1980, in NLC-132-22-10-9-0, RAC, JCP.L.

112. Wayne Smith, *Closest of Enemies*, pp. 200–204; and David W. Engstrom, *Presidential Decision Making Adrift: The Carter Administration and the Mariel Boatlift* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), pp. 48–50.

113. Speech by Fidel Castro, 8 March 1980, in *Granma*, 10 March 1980, pp. 1–4.

possible measures, but he had to wait another four months for the reports.¹¹⁴ The State Department's Tarnoff in an interview years later said that Havana should have understood the limits of U.S. presidential power. Carter and his federal government could not simply return to Cuba hijackers who had been acquitted by juries in South Florida. All Carter could do was "not to endorse [their decision]." In short, the U.S. system was unresponsive, but this was "not deliberate."¹¹⁵

The Cuban authorities viewed U.S. inaction from a very different angle, however. The topic of ex-prisoners and hijackers came up at the U.S.-Cuban meeting in Havana on 16–17 January 1980. Here again, as in the previous talk in Havana in December 1978, Tarnoff asked for Castro's patience and explained that the U.S. government was accepting half a million migrants, including 200,000 Vietnamese, from around the world. Castro was quick to point out that Washington kept receiving illegally arrived Cubans without prosecuting their crimes. In view of a perceived U.S. double standard, he posed two options. "Either you take measures [to return them] or we should be free of any obligation to control those who wish to leave illegally." Tarnoff remarked that "you must recognize the special situation that exists" and added, "It is not possible to forcibly return these people to Cuba." This comment angered Castro. "That's an absurd situation," he exclaimed. "Some countries are criticized because they do not let people leave. [But] we are willing to let anyone leave who wishes to."¹¹⁶ Pastor replied with sarcasm, "According to our figures," he said, "we project that by the year 2000 there will be ten million wishing to leave Cuba."¹¹⁷

Pastor's comment reflected his belief that the emigration problem was something Cuba should take care of—alone. After all, without realizing the fatal consequences for U.S. border control, Pastor had been looking for ways to exploit any indications of Cuba's weaknesses. The main U.S. goal in the talks was to see whether Castro would criticize the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (Castro refused to do so). The secondary purpose was to exchange views with

114. Wayne Smith, *Closest of Enemies*, pp. 204–206. See also Handwritten note in Cyrus Vance to Jimmy Carter, 5 March 1980, in NLC-128-15-3-3-8, JCPL; and Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic*, p. 354.

115. Interview by David Engstrom with Peter Tarnoff, p. 7, in Folder "Tarnoff," Box 1, Mirra Ojito Papers, UM-CHC.

116. Memorandum of Conversation between Fidel Castro, Peter Tarnoff, and Robert A. Pastor, pp. 72–73, in Folder "Cuba—Carter's Trip, May 12–17, 2002 [2]," VF, JCPL. Despite the peak of Cold War tensions after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Carter sent the State Department's Tarnoff and the NSC's Pastor to see whether Castro criticized the invasion. Castro refused to do so but presented his views on world politics for eleven hours.

117. Memorandum of Conversation between Castro, Tarnoff, and Pastor, pp. 72–73.

the Cuban leader on world politics, which Castro did for many long hours. Listening to Cuba's concerns was the last thing U.S. officials wanted to do. For Castro, the lack of U.S. responsiveness to repeated Cuban appeals must have suggested that the United States was more hostile toward Cuba than it actually was. In Castro's mind, the emigration crisis was another U.S. provocation, followed by the Soviet brigade crisis, as he explained to the Soviet ambassador in Cuba. Castro apparently believed the United States politicized and exploited humanitarian issues to attack Cuba's Communist regime.¹¹⁸

Carter's responses to the Peruvian embassy crisis exacerbated Castro's inclination to assume the worst of U.S. attitudes. On 1 April 1980, six Cuban asylum seekers crashed a minibus through the gates of the Peruvian embassy in Havana, resulting in the death of a Cuban guard. Infuriated, Castro withdrew police protection from the embassy and announced that anyone wishing to leave Cuba could enter the embassy. The result was more than he expected. Within 48 hours more than 10,000 Cubans had entered the embassy. The crisis not only caught the attention of world media but evoked emotional responses from Cubans in both Havana and Miami. Echoing the front-page *Granma* editorial of 7 April, which called these asylum seekers "lumpens" (anti-socials), thousands of Cubans marched and shouted, "Go away, delinquents! Go away, scum!" They soon started to throw stones and rotten food at the asylum seekers. Across the sea the Cubans in the Peruvian embassy became heroes. Cubans in Miami started to collect money, food, and medicine for them and demanded that Carter take all of them. The militants waved flags and chanted, "War! War! War!"¹¹⁹

Carter refused their demands and strove to avoid turning the incident into a U.S.-Cuban issue. Aware of widespread public opposition to rising immigration, the U.S. Congress had enacted the 1980 Refugee Act, which required individuals to prove a well-founded fear of persecution. Granting unconditional entry to Cubans would buck the intent of the law. Such a practice would also antagonize African Americans and liberals insofar as Carter had refused refugee status for thousands of Haitians trying to enter the United States. More important might have been Washington's fear of creating a precedent for future migration waves from Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central America.¹²⁰ Carter sought to deal with the Peruvian embassy crisis through

118. Vorotnikov, *Gavana—Moskva*, p. 117; and Memorandum of Conversation between José Luis Padrón, Peter Tarnoff, etc., 17–18 June 1980, in DDRS.

119. See the extensive coverage in *Granma* (Havana), 8 April 1980, pp. 1–2, 9 April 1980, pp. 2–4, and 10 April 1980, pp. 1–4; and *The Miami Herald*, 8 April 1980, pp. 1A, 8A.

120. Discussion Paper, Mini-PRC Meeting on Cuban-Peruvian Situation, 8 April 1980, in DDRS.

a multilateral approach. At his urging, the UN and the International Red Cross stepped forward. Spain, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Canada, Belgium, and Venezuela offered to take hundreds of the Cubans. Costa Rica agreed to serve as a processing point for their emigration.

Out of frustration, Carter sought to exploit the crisis. In his remarks on 9 April 1980, he emphasized that “the real threat of Cuba” was not its military capability but its claim to being “a model to be emulated by people who are dissatisfied with their own lot.” He stressed that the Peruvian embassy crisis had shattered the myth of the Cuban society. “We see the hunger of many people on that island to escape political deprivation of freedom and also economic diversity.” Those who entered the embassy were “freedom-loving Cubans” who had been unwilling to live in a closed, totalitarian society.¹²¹ The speech was a deliberate attempt to put Havana on the defensive in the Cold War battle for the Third World.¹²² The next day, newspapers announced that the U.S. armed forces would be embarking on Operation Solid Shield starting on 8 May—an operation that, though long planned, was the largest military exercise in the Caribbean in four years.

Carter’s address on 9 April was the last blow. Havana ended the dialogue with Washington. Indignant at the speech, Castro decided to retaliate against Carter. *Granma* published an ugly cartoon of the U.S. president next to a Nazi military officer, and Castro opened Mariel, a port 25 miles west of Havana, to force the U.S. president’s hand. On 19 April the Cuban government announced that Cuban Americans could come to Cuba to pick up their families and friends. Behind the scenes, the Cuban regime had already arranged the first boatlift by contacting a few Miami Cubans to “break the ice,” as Padrón recalls this pivotal moment. As the news of the first boatlift spread, Cubans living in the United States rushed to Miami and Key West looking for boats or persons who could go to Mariel on their behalf.¹²³

Fearful of a flood of Cubans flowing into the United States, the administration convened interagency meetings. Although both Castro and the Cuban-American community wanted the refugees to leave Cuba, the administration

121. Jimmy Carter, 9 April 1980, in APP. See also John E. Reinhardt to Zbigniew Brzezinski, 25 April 1980, in Folder “Broadcasting to Cuba,” Box 90501, Carnes Lord Files, Ronald Reagan Library.

122. Pastor complained that the State Department did little to highlight “a failure of the Cuban model” until Carter corrected it with his speech. See Robert A. Pastor to Zbigniew Brzezinski and David Aaron, 10 April 1980, with Talking Points, “Next Steps on U.S. Policy to Cubans in Peruvian Embassy,” in NLC-24-87-6-4-9, RAC, JCPL.

123. The caricature appeared in *Granma* (Havana), 10 April 1980, p. 5. This and other versions of a very ugly Carter appeared continually for a while. For Cuba’s decision, see Padrón, interview; and Vorotnikov, *Gavana—Moskva*, p. 119. For a Cuban-American view, see Ojito, *Finding Mañana*, ch. 7.

hoped to avoid this. The first idea U.S. officials came up with was to dissuade Miami Cubans from heading toward Cuba. Carter threatened to impose fines against boat captains for each person they brought in, but he could not stop the most determined people. The administration then set up a meeting with Miami Cubans and decided to wait for its results. Brzezinski acknowledged that the Cuban-American community had become “hysterical,” but he urged Carter to “open up a dialogue with the community.” Even though Brzezinski did not know how it would go, he stressed “it is essential that we try to reach out to the community or risk encountering increasing defiance and confrontation.”¹²⁴

This last-minute initiative for a dialogue bore little fruit. At a meeting with forty Miami Cubans on 26 April 1980, Acting Secretary of State Warren Christopher asked for their cooperation. “We need your help,” his talking points went. “We urge you to use your influence to hold back the sending of boats to Cuba.”¹²⁵ The plea was of no avail. Instead, according to Newsom, it merely clashed with “the highly emotional feelings in south Florida about the possibility of recovering grandmothers and cousins.” The meeting was “a disaster,” as half the invitees left the room in the middle.¹²⁶ The administration misunderstood the dynamics of migration politics at this critical moment. For the Miami Cubans rushing to Mariel, no issue was more important than family reunification. “Once the boats were gone,” the U.S. coordinator for refugee affairs, Victor Palmieri, recalls, “the game was over.”¹²⁷

Conclusion

The late 1970s presented a rare opportunity for Americans, Cubans, and Cuban émigrés in the United States to come to terms with the tumultuous past of U.S.-Cuban relations. Carter wanted to normalize U.S.-Cuban relations to signal a new U.S. attitude toward Latin America and stabilize global

124. Summary, Mini-Presidential Review Committee Meeting on Cuban Refugees, 22 April 1980, in NLC-17-40-7-7-5, JCPL; and Zbigniew Brzezinski to Jimmy Carter, 25 April 1980, in NLC-41-14-11-8, JCPL.

125. “Talking Points,” n.d., in State Department Records, ARA/CCA 86 D 90, Box 7544. The document was supposedly used by Christopher for the 26 April meeting. I am grateful to David Engstrom for sending me this record.

126. Interview with David Newsom, in Foreign Affairs Oral History Project, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, Library of Congress; and interview with David Engstrom, pp. 21–22, in author’s possession.

127. Interview with Victor Palmieri and David Engstrom, 22 February 1988, p. 9.

affairs through greater communication. Carter also expressed sympathy for human rights in Cuba. He listened to the moderate wings of the Cuban-American community and cracked down on the militarists. A sense of justice and willingness to take on moral responsibilities, rather than sheer political necessity, drove his actions. Brzezinski noted at the time that the issue of human rights was important not only because it was good in itself but also because it was important to Carter and the Cuban-American community.¹²⁸

Washington's new attitude greatly impressed Castro, who saw Carter as morally principled and personally likable. Even though Carter did not lift the embargo as Castro requested, Castro started to envision a new economic model in which Miami Cubans, with their accumulated capital and skills, would play a significant role. Havana's decision to release thousands of Cuban prisoners reflected Castro's aspiration to mend fences with Carter without making concessions on Africa.¹²⁹ But Castro also looked to Miami, basing his foreign policy on something more than realpolitik. Havana's permission for Cuban Americans to visit Cuba, which had great implications for bilateral relations, came out of the combination of Havana's need for capital, its confidence in the maturity of the Cuban Revolution, and its willingness to cater to Miami's human needs.

As others have shown, U.S.-Cuban dialogue stalled mainly over the Cold War in Africa, where East-West rivalry intermingled with North-South conflicts. But the disagreements over Cuban migration—resulting from Washington's shift in attitude toward Havana-Miami relations—also endangered the spirit of U.S.-Cuban dialogue. Despite an initial willingness to value Cuban-American interests, the Carter administration effectively backed out when it embraced a narrower definition of national interests that linked U.S.-Cuban dialogue with a change in Havana's foreign policy. After urging Havana to improve relations with the diaspora community in Miami, U.S. officials grew alarmed when Havana unexpectedly quickened the pace of U.S.-Cuban reconciliation after September 1978. The relatively swift rapprochement between Havana and Miami stimulated new momentum for a change in the lives of ordinary people on both sides of the border, U.S. officials disregarded Havana's emigration agenda and seemed to implement policies whose legitimacy was deeply contested at the grassroots level. By April 1980, the Carter administration's actions failed to meet either Havana's desire to be treated as an equal or the Miami Cubans' demand for special attention to their needs.

128. See Zbigniew Brzezinski's comment at the policy review committee meeting. Minutes, Policy Review Committee Meeting, 3 August 1977.

129. Gleijeses, *Visions of Freedom*, p. 119.

The growing discrepancy, conflicts, and contradictions between U.S. foreign policy and Cuban and Cuban-American politics culminated in a migration crisis that Washington failed to anticipate, prevent, or control. The interaction between diplomacy and human migration shaped U.S.-Cuban relations at a critical moment in the history of both countries.

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