

CUBA

A Way Forward

By Peter Kornbluh

On December 17, 2014, a quick succession of events ended with a radical reconfiguration of U.S.-Cuba relations. In the early morning, a U.S. government plane arrived in Havana to repatriate Alan Gross, the development contractor who had been imprisoned for more than five years for smuggling sophisticated satellite communications systems onto the island as part of USAID's "Cuban Democracy and Contingency Planning Program." After Gross boarded, the plane did not take off until another jet, carrying three Cuban spies who President Obama had just released after 16 years in prison, touched down at José Martí International Airport. After a three-hour flight, Gross landed at Andrews Air Force base where Secretary of State John Kerry welcomed him home.

Soon thereafter, President Raúl Castro appeared on Cuban television to announce the long-awaited return of the three remaining members of "the Cuban Five," who are known as "anti-terrorism heroes" in Cuba. He also stated that he had spoken on the phone with President Obama and agreed to "the adoption of mutual steps to improve the bilateral atmosphere and advance toward normalization" with the United States. Simultaneously, President Obama went on U.S. television to announce a historic halt to more than a half century of covert and overt aggression toward Cuba and a plan for peaceful and productive diplomatic and economic relations in the future.

In describing the policies of the past, which include the Bay of Pigs invasion, CIA assassination plots, and the 52-year-old trade embargo, Obama invoked the F-word: "failure." The United States had pursued "an outdated approach that, for decades, has failed to advance our interests," the president informed the nation. Now, his administration would pursue rapprochement and reconciliation — granting Cuba full diplomatic recognition and expanding trade and travel between the two nations. The United States "chooses to cut loose the shackles of the past," Obama declared, "so as to reach for a better future — for the Cuban people, for the American people, for our entire hemisphere, and for the world."

A Quantum Change in Relations

By any standard, Obama's decision to normalize relations with Cuba represents a historic breakthrough





A road in Havana, Cuba.
(Photo by Ana García.)

for U.S. foreign policy. By burying the enmity of the past, the president has freed future policymakers to pursue substantive national interests as they relate to Cuba, among them: counterterrorism, counternarcotics, immigration, and environmental cooperation. Under a normal rubric of relations, Washington will also advance its interests, and investments, in economic development on the island as Cuba restructures its economy from strict, state-centric socialism to a capitalist-oriented system.

At the same time, Obama has significantly advanced U.S. regional and international interests. Until December 17, the United States was the only major country in the world that did not have normal relations with Cuba. As the annual UN vote denouncing the trade embargo has repeatedly demonstrated, the cold war-era effort to isolate the Castro regime resulted in Washington itself becoming isolated. Obama's decision also takes the issue of U.S. hostility toward Cuba off the inter-American agenda, where it has reverberated for years. It comes as no surprise that, throughout the region, Latin American leaders greeted the change in policy with applause. "For us social fighters, today is a historic day," declared Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff.

Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico have pressed Washington for years to end its regime-change programs toward Havana. Indeed, in December, the Latin American nations forced the issue onto Obama's agenda by inviting Cuba to the Summit of the Americas for the first time. By acting decisively now, Obama has assured that the April 2015 summit will become another positive step toward more normal bilateral and regional relations, rather than a forum for contentious debate over the future of U.S. policy toward Cuba.

For Cuba, normal relations with the United States will bring a host of benefits. International banking sanctions will be lifted when the State Department removes Cuba from its "terrorist nations list," where it has been falsely kept since the Reagan years. Full reintegration into the inter-American system will open up Cuba's access to multilateral credit, training, and technical support. Increased travel to Cuba by U.S. citizens will significantly increase tourism revenues and stimulate a boom in construction, services, and infrastructure. Remittances from Cuban-Americans to their relatives on the island, a leading form of foreign investment, are likely to quadruple. The expansion of Internet access on the island will also enhance future entrepreneurship and assist economic reform.

Psychologically, the end of hostilities removes the existential security threat of U.S. intervention — a

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threat that has overshadowed the island since the Bay of Pigs invasion. Indeed, after withstanding more than a half century of perpetual hostility, Cuba has achieved a nationalist victory: the United States has recognized, and finally accepted, the existence and independence of the revolution as a *fait accompli*.

The Precedents of Back-Channel Diplomacy

The history books will record that Raúl Castro, who succeeded his ailing brother as president in July of 2006, led Cuba to this pivotal juncture. But the declassified documents on past, precedent-setting efforts at secret diplomacy also reveal that Fidel Castro repeatedly sought better relations with Washington, albeit on his own terms, which included full respect for Cuba's sovereignty and independence of action. Fidel reached out to virtually every president, even those hardliners who would seemingly be the least likely to engage in secret dialogue with Cuba toward better relations.

Consider Fidel Castro's initiatives with these presidents:

KENNEDY: Less than five months after the Bay of Pigs invasion, Castro dispatched Che Guevara to engage in cigar diplomacy with the Kennedy administration. At an August 1961 Alliance for Progress meeting in Uruguay, Guevara delivered a beautiful mahogany box of Cuban cigars for the president to Richard Goodwin, a top White House aide. "Thank you for the Bay of Pigs," Che said to Goodwin. The invasion had allowed the revolution "to consolidate" around Fidel Castro's leadership and "transformed them from an aggrieved little country to an equal," Che noted, according to Goodwin's secret memorandum of the conversation.

Cuba sought a "modus vivendi," Guevara said during an impromptu meeting that lasted through the night. They were willing to negotiate on Washington's concerns. But "Cuba could discuss no formula that would mean giving up the type of society to which they were dedicated."

Two years later, Castro and Kennedy did pursue secret talks on improving relations. Indeed, in November 1963, Washington and Havana were actively engaged in back-channel diplomacy to establish an agenda for the first negotiating session to see what might be possible. The assassination in Dallas aborted that first, promising bilateral effort to improve U.S.-Cuba relations.

JOHNSON: In the aftermath of Kennedy's sudden death, Castro reached out to Lyndon Johnson, using a reporter from ABC News, Lisa Howard, as his emissary.

While she was in Cuba filming a television special on the Cuban Revolution, Castro asked Howard to deliver an "oral message" to the White House saying that he hoped that Johnson would continue with the courageous diplomacy initiated by Kennedy. Castro said, "Tell the president (and I cannot stress this too strongly) that I seriously hope that Cuba and the United States can eventually sit down in an atmosphere of good will and of mutual respect and negotiate our differences." The message cautioned, however, that the president "should not interpret my conciliatory attitude, my desire for discussions, as a sign of weakness. Such an interpretation would be a serious miscalculation. We are not weak... the revolution is strong.... And it is from this position of strength that we wish to resolve our differences with the United States." Back-channel communications continued during Johnson's tenure, but no negotiations to normalize relations came to fruition.

NIXON: In the most surprising attempt to reach out to a U.S. president, Castro sent an exploratory "feeler" to Richard Nixon only 10 days after his inauguration. Despite Nixon's known antipathy toward the Cuban Revolution, Castro used the Swiss ambassador as an emissary. He wanted to "convey a message that he was interested in establishing a discussion," Ambassador Alfred Fischli told Secretary of State William Rogers, "presumably with a view to edging towards a *détente*."

Eventually, Nixon's top foreign policy aide, Henry Kissinger, would follow up on these messages. Kissinger sent a secret communiqué of his own to Castro in June 1974 calling for a discreet dialogue, and after Nixon resigned, instigated a series of furtive meetings between U.S. and Cuban officials that took place at the swanky Pierre Hotel in New York City and at a dingy café in La Guardia Airport, among other locations. For the very first secret meeting, Kissinger authorized an *aide memoire* to be read to Castro's representatives. "The ideological differences between us are wide. But the fact that such talks will not bridge the ideological differences does not mean that they cannot be useful in addressing concrete issues which it is in the interest of both countries to resolve," stated the diplomatic message.

But Castro had other priorities at the time. His decision to send troops to Angola in October 1975, in response to a request from Agostinho Neto to help repel CIA-backed guerrillas and South African troops that were attacking Neto's governing party, aborted the secret talks on normalization. Declassified memoranda of a subsequent conversation between Kissinger and Nixon's successor,



Photo by Elliot Erwitt/Magnum Photos.

American journalist Lisa Howard with Fidel Castro in Cuba, 1964.

President Ford, reveal their anger at the audacity of Cuba's extension of military power to the African continent. "I think we are going to have to smash Castro," Kissinger informed the president in the Oval Office on February 25, 1976. "We probably can't do it before the [November 1976] elections." "I agree," Ford responded.

Kissinger promptly ordered his aides to draft top-secret contingency plans to attack Cuba. But, since Ford lost the presidency to Jimmy Carter later that year, there would be no opportunity to implement those military operations.

CARTER: Less than three weeks after Jimmy Carter's inauguration, Castro used a televised interview with journalist Bill Moyers to send a conciliatory message to the White House. The new president struck him as a man with "a sense of morals," Fidel stated publicly, and the United States and Cuba did not have to "live constantly as enemies." His message resonated with Carter, who shared that sentiment.

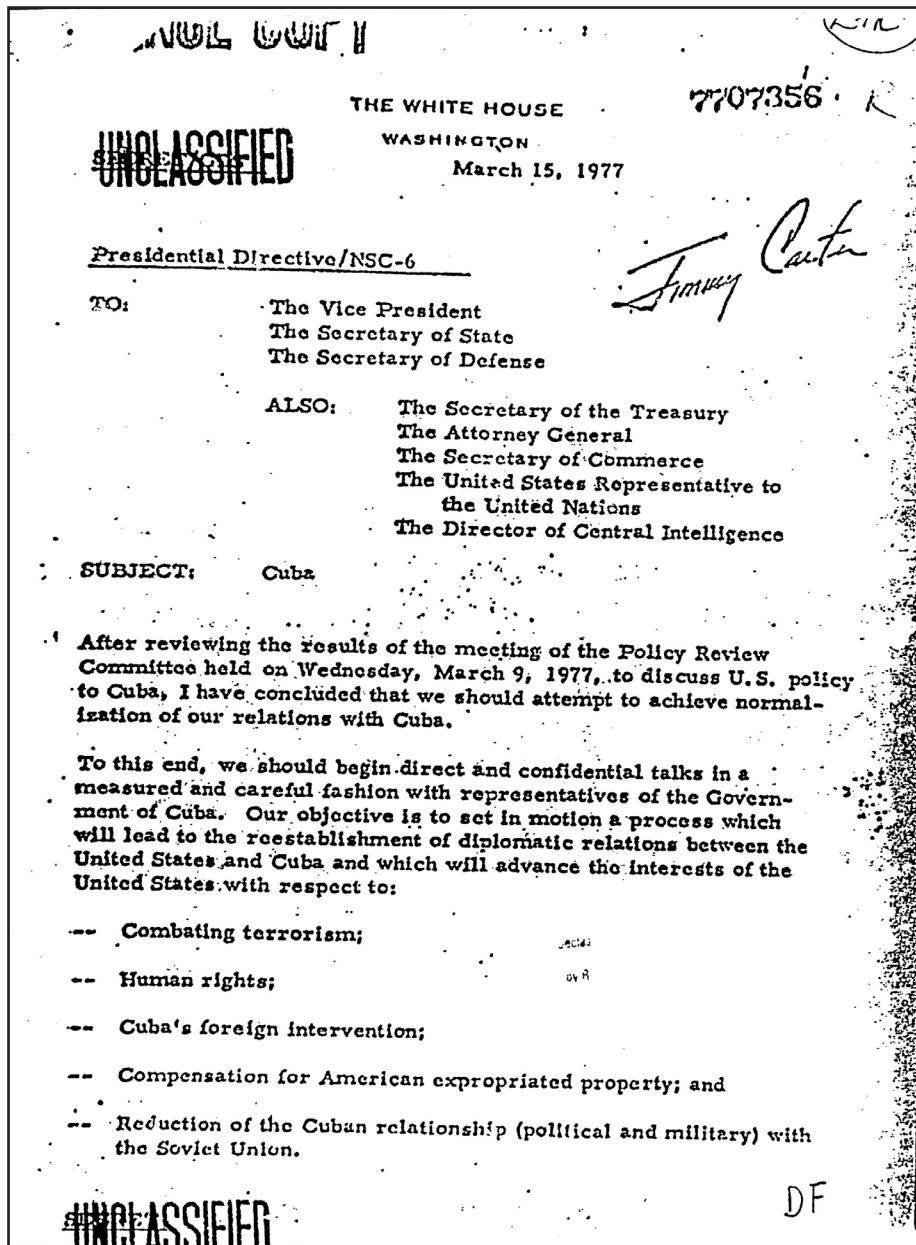
Like Barack Obama, Jimmy Carter assumed the presidency with a preference for civility toward friend and foe alike. Cuba was one of several nations with which he was determined to find common ground. "I felt then, as I do now, that the best way to bring about a change

in [Cuba's] Communist regime was to have open trade and commerce, and visitation, and diplomatic relations," Carter noted in an interview with William LeoGrande and me for our book, *Back Channel to Cuba: The Hidden History of Negotiations Between Washington and Havana*.

Toward that goal, Carter became the first president to issue a dramatic national security directive, NSC-6, in March 1977, which stated: "I have concluded that we should attempt to achieve normalization of our relations with Cuba. To this end, we should begin direct and confidential talks in a measured and careful fashion with representatives of the Government of Cuba."

Carter's directive led almost immediately to U.S.-Cuba talks that resulted in the establishment of the U.S. and Cuban interest sections — the diplomatic offices that Obama now intends to upgrade to full embassy status. Secretly, the Carter White House pursued a series of talks with the Cubans — in New York, Atlanta, Mexico, and even in Havana — to negotiate normal relations. But Castro refused to meet Carter's demand that Cuba withdraw its troops from Africa as a precondition for lifting the U.S. embargo. "We have never discussed with you the activities of the United States throughout the entire world," Castro told Carter's emissaries, Peter

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President Carter's declassified 1977 directive to normalize U.S.-Cuba relations.

Tarnoff and Robert Pastor, during a secret meeting in December 1978. "Perhaps it is idealistic of me, but I never accepted the universal prerogatives of the United States. I never accepted, and never will accept, the existence of a different law and different rules" for small countries and big countries.

In September of 1980, Carter separately sent two emissaries to meet again with Castro in an effort to end the immigration crisis known as the Mariel boatlift. If Castro curtailed the flow of refugees from Mariel, Carter offered, the U.S.

would engage in talks with the Cubans over the full range of bilateral relations in Carter's second term. Castro complied, but Carter lost his bid for reelection. "In retrospect, knowing what I know since I left the White House," Carter reflected in our interview, "I should have gone ahead and been more flexible in dealing with Cuba and established full diplomatic relations."

Rebuilding Bridges

Like President Carter, President Obama came into office believing that engagement with Cuba offered

the best opportunity to promote U.S. foreign policy interests on the island and in the region. "We've been engaging in a failed policy with Cuba for the last 50 years, and we need to change it," he declared as a candidate in 2007. Like Carter, Obama took initial steps towards change: he improved the rhetorical tone of U.S. policy, authorized unlimited travel to the island for Cuban-Americans, and relaxed the restrictions on travel by U.S. citizens imposed by his predecessor. But the Bush-era efforts at regime change through USAID's "democracy-promotion" programs continued. The December 3, 2009, arrest and incarceration of Alan Gross — a subcontractor in that USAID effort, who traveled to Cuba five times in 2009 posing as a tourist to install independent satellite communications networks for future use by democracy advocates — created a major political obstacle for Obama to fulfill his campaign pledge to "write a new chapter" in U.S.-Cuba relations during his first term as president.

Unlike Carter, Obama won reelection. As a second-term Democrat, freed of future electoral considerations, Obama put revamping Cuba policy near the top of his very full foreign policy agenda. Drawing on the examples of previous back-channel diplomacy with Cuba, the president authorized "Project Ardilla" — a secret set of negotiations with the Cubans to arrange a prisoner swap for Alan Gross, end past hostilities, and normalize future relations between Washington and Havana.

The first meeting was held in Canada in June 2013, one of seven secret negotiating sessions that took place in Ottawa and Toronto with the support of the Canadian government. The Obama administration also enlisted Pope

Francis as an interlocutor. In March 2014, President Obama and Secretary of State Kerry met with the pope at the Vatican and briefed him on “Project Ardilla.” The pope provided both moral suasion and political cover for normalizing U.S.-Cuba relations. The Holy See also hosted two secret meetings, including a negotiating session in October to finalize an exchange of Alan Gross and an imprisoned CIA asset in Cuba for the three Cuban spies. In their televised presentations on December 17, both Obama and Castro thanked the pope and the Canadian government for being “partners” in the effort to bring the two sides together.

To be sure, as Castro reminded the Cuban public, this new understanding between Washington and Havana “in no way means that the heart of the matter has been solved,” since completely lifting the trade embargo will require a majority vote in the U.S. Congress. With Republicans firmly in control of the House and Senate, that vote is unlikely to happen in the near future. But by taking major steps to leave the past behind and to rebuild bilateral bridges for the future, the United States and Cuba have made history and moved forward.

“Our relations are like a bridge in wartime. It is not a bridge that can be reconstructed easily, as fast as it was destroyed,” Raúl Castro eloquently observed during a meeting with two U.S. senators almost 40 years ago. “If both parties reconstruct their part of the bridge, we can shake hands without winners or losers.” Finally, the reconstruction of relations has begun.

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Alan Gross boards a U.S. government plane during his December 17, 2014, release at an airport near Havana, Cuba.



Photo by Lawrence Jackson/The White House via Getty Images.