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CUBAN REALITIES: MAY 1975

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REPORT

BY

SENATOR GEORGE S. McGOVERN

TO THE

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

UNITED STATES SENATE



AUGUST 1975

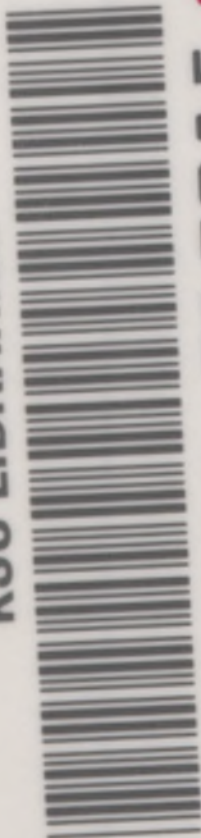
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LETTER OF TRANSMITTAL

UNITED STATES SENATE,
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS,
Washington, D.C., July 21, 1975.

Hon. JOHN SPARKMAN,
Chairman, Senate Committee on Foreign Relations,
Capitol Office S-116, Washington, D.C.

DEAR MR. CHAIRMAN: In accordance with the rules of the Committee, I am herewith filing a report on my recent trip to Cuba.

As you know, I made this trip in connection with the Committee's continuing interest in exploring the question of U.S. relations with Cuba. Mr. Bob Dockery of the Committee staff accompanied me and provided counsel on each of the issues we encountered.

Though my stay in Havana was brief, I believe it made a significant contribution to the normalization process. In the course of my visit Prime Minister Castro made several further gestures of accommodation to the American people and to American policy in the Western Hemisphere. As a result of both discussions and observations in Cuba, I returned with a reinforced impression that whatever may have been the case in the past, Cuba now places first priority on internal development and external détente.

I believe Cuba's gestures warrant and require a positive response from Washington. If the Executive Branch fails to follow up, as it did in the aftermath of the 1973 hijacking agreement, then Congress should pursue its own initiatives to bring the embargo against Cuba to an end.

In this regard, Mr. Chairman, you are to be commended for your own continuing efforts to bring about a change in U.S. policy. Your leadership on this issue has been most encouraging.

Finally, I want to thank you and the Committee staff for the assistance I received in making the arrangements for this effort and in making the trip itself a success. And I want to take special note of the helpful cooperation of the Department of State and the Department of Defense. In light of past efforts to discourage all travel to Cuba, I regard the constructive attitude of the Department of State in this case as evidence of at least a growing receptivity to consider the views we have been trying to advance.

Sincerely,

GEORGE MCGOVERN.

LETTER OF TRANSMITTAL

CUBAN REALITIES: MAY 1975

I. RECOMMENDATIONS

At the earliest possible moment, I believe the United States should end its trade embargo against Cuba, and explicitly acknowledge an interest in establishing normal diplomatic relations with the government of Prime Minister Fidel Castro.

My convictions on this score were reinforced during a trip to Cuba this May on behalf of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. The primary reasons for a change of policy relate to America, not Cuba.

Normal trade and diplomacy with the United States will doubtless have only limited impact on the Cuban system and on that nation's influence beyond its shores. American trade can be important to the Cuban economy, but it cannot be decisive, given the available alternatives.

After the recent history of bitter hostility, some might argue that an American reversal now would confer legitimacy on the Cuban Government. But Mr. Castro does not need us to establish his credentials. His authority will continue whether we accept it or not.

So the fundamental need for a new policy toward Cuba lies not in what it will say about Cuba, but in what it will say—both to ourselves and to the world—about the United States.

If détente with the Soviet Union and China has displaced the rigid anti-Communism of the 1950s and 1960s, continuing hostility toward Cuba suggests that U. S. foreign policy is at least inconsistent and bewildering. Our persistent effort to isolate Cuba diplomatically and commercially is not only a failure; it undermines confidence in our common sense and reliability. That alone warrants a new policy. It is an anachronism unworthy of a great power to bargain with major communist nations, while we embargo a small island which poses no real threat.

In a major address on U.S. policy in Latin America, delivered in Houston last March, Secretary of State Kissinger indicated that our decisions toward Cuba will be "heavily influenced" by that country's external policies. He stated:

Fundamental change cannot come unless Cuba demonstrates a readiness to assume the mutuality of obligation and regard upon which a new relationship must be founded.

But it does not appear that our policy has, in fact, been shaped by those standards.

Over the years, our main objection to Cuba's international conduct has been its supposed policy of "exporting" revolution. The supposition of such a policy was based on Castro's early decision to make Cuba

a training ground and launching site for insurgencies elsewhere in the Western Hemisphere. After the Bay of Pigs and the disclosure of CIA assassination plots against Mr. Castro, American self-righteousness on this score sounds a bit strained. In any event, whether as a result of past failure, Soviet dissuasion, or a Cuban change of heart, the Cubans ceased treating revolution as an exportable commodity some years ago. Today, Cuba's external posture—and the explicit commitment of the new Cuban draft Constitution—is to maintain normal relations with all countries that respect Cuban sovereignty, notwithstanding political and economic differences. Shortly after my visit to Cuba, Deputy Prime Minister Carlos Rafael Rodriguez, in an interview in London, made the shift still more explicit, declaring that Cuba's policy is to support progressive governments, not to subvert those it sees as oppressive.

Neither the United States nor Cuba has lost conviction about the merits of their respective systems. But in recent years, both nations have become more attentive to questions of national sovereignty and international law. Both here and there, this is a trend to be welcomed.

And as negative signals have been muted, positive ones have been sent.

From the Cuban point of view the anti-hijacking understanding of 1973 was a major gesture, going well beyond "mutuality of obligation." Indeed, it was a case in which the Castro government helped resolve a grave international danger without demanding anything of substance in return.

That step was followed in February of 1974, at the end of a visit to Cuba by Soviet First Secretary Brezhnev, by a joint Soviet-Cuban communique reaffirming the principles of détente and coexistence. Cuba has initiated the normalization of relations with other Western Hemisphere governments—including some once listed as targets of Cuban-inspired subversion. Prime Minister Castro has been accessible and cordial to American visitors including, before my trip, Foreign Relations Committee Chief of Staff Pat M. Holt, Senator Javits and Senator Pell, and members of Senator Kennedy's staff. Since my return the Cuban government has responded favorably to the request I delivered on behalf of Chairman Sparkman that arrangements be made to return a \$2 million ransom paid by Southern Airways in 1972. The Cubans had previously linked this case to broader questions by writing a check for repayment on a Cuban bank account in New York which, like all Cuban assets in this country, has been frozen since 1960, and by offering payment in nickel, which would be prohibited by the embargo. By now offering direct payment through other means, Cuba has yielded these debating points.

In response to a letter which I delivered for Senator Brooke, the Prime Minister agreed readily to permit the parents of Boston Red Sox pitcher Luis Tiant to visit the United States. Mr. Castro expressed strong interest in the concept of baseball and other sports exchanges.

Through this range of contact and activity, I believe the Cuban leadership has clearly signaled an interest in improved relations.

Secretary Kissinger also said in Houston:

We see no virtue in perpetual antagonism between the United States and Cuba . . . we are prepared to move in a new direction if Cuba will.

I submit that Cuba has. I hope we will.

State Department officials suggest that there have been American gestures. They cite in particular the approval in 1974 of licenses for exports to Cuba by Canadian and Argentinian subsidiaries of American firms. Those steps were useful, although one suspects that Cuba was hardly considered—that they were taken largely out of deference to Argentine and Canadian feelings. In both countries a denial would have been perceived as American interference in their internal affairs.

While of course I would not profess to represent official American policy, I did suggest in Cuba that these steps had significance, and also that our government's agreement to previous trips, and its very helpful cooperation with my own journey, demonstrated an open and promising attitude in the Executive Branch. I noted that in response to a recommendation from Senator Pell and Senator Javits, the Administration had also relaxed somewhat the restrictions on travel by members of Cuba's delegation to the United Nations.

But these small gestures have served their purpose. They have broken the ice. The time has come to move to the next stage.

It is proper to establish mutuality of obligation as a principle of normal international relations. But if we insist upon it for others, we must also demonstrate that we believe in it for ourselves. In the case of Cuba, that requires as an obvious precondition elimination of the trade embargo.

The official American position is that we have been bound as a member to respect the ban on trade with Cuba which was adopted in 1964 by the Organization of American States. In this regard two things are worth noting: (1) the United States imposed its own sanctions prior to any OAS decision, and (2) ten members of the OAS have been talking and trading freely with Cuba despite the embargo. Moreover, Prime Minister Castro indicated for the first time during my visit that a beginning could be made if we simply permitted trade in food and medicines, commodities not restricted by the OAS. There was not timely response to that signal. The United States has wasted an opportunity to take an important initiative toward bilateral relations prior to the OAS decision in Costa Rica, to permit members to exercise freedom of choice on the issue.

With considerable logic, the Cubans argue that the embargo has been a nonmutual act of hostility—an unwarranted and unprovoked attempt to exclude Cuba from international trade. There is, of course, no Cuban embargo against the United States. There is nothing comparable at all.

Prime Minister Castro reiterated to me his government's willingness to discuss legitimate differences, including the question of compensation for property that was expropriated when he took power. But, as he put it, the Cubans “. . . can't bargain with a knife at our throats.”

The knife of the embargo also pains the hand that holds it. It is a needless division between the United States and many Latin American nations; it denies employment and earnings to American workers; it deprives American consumers lower-priced Cuban sugar and other commodities. For our own sake more than for Cuba's the embargo should be set aside so that we may move toward a rational settlement of the Cuban-American antagonism.

A new policy will not remake Cuba in the American image. Cuba is a one-party Communist state. Its leaders deny many of the libertarian values we wish for others and demand for ourselves. On many international and philosophical questions Cuba may oppose the American view.

But boycotting Cuba will not resolve the historic debate between Karl Marx and John Locke any more than did ignoring China for 25 years. We have social systems which are different, but so be it; our ideologies are at odds, but that does not preclude trade and dialogue. The relevant fact is that an American response can signal to Cuba, and also to the world, that we appreciate common sense and mutual respect. It can demonstrate that we have enough confidence in our own system to compete fairly and deal forthrightly with others. It can declare our determination to look beyond obsolete quarrels, in search of cooperation with all nations on the common problems—food, pollution, population, energy, and the arms race—which know no ideology and threaten every society.

II. IMPRESSIONS OF CUBA

"One swallow does not a summer make." Nor does a three day visit to Cuba give a comprehensive view. But it is possible to learn certain things and to offer some useful impressions.

I visited a dramatically changed nation. Americans recall pre-revolutionary Cuba vaguely—as an exotic vacation resort, a watering-hole for mobsters, prostitutes and gamblers, a dictatorship which welcomed easy American money, a privileged ruling class, impoverished rural workers and flocks of beggars on the streets of Havana.

The revolution worked an immediate transformation. But there has been another transformation since then—one which may explain in part why the Castro government is now so obviously prepared to deal on a constructive basis with the United States.

In the early 1960s Castro's revolution had reason to be profoundly suspicious and fearful of the United States. The Bay of Pigs invasion fueled those fears—and they were reinforced by the conviction among Cuban officials that they were the targets of continual CIA assassination attempts and harassment. The embargo and the hemispheric isolation of Cuba represented an undeclared war against a small and nearby nation. We used to speak of a "Communist threat ninety miles from our shores." Cubans perceived a far more real American threat at the same distance, but with far more powerful means to carry it out, indeed enough to destroy them.

This vulnerability partially explains Cuba's fierce anti-Americanism in the last decade, its determination to create some allies in this hemisphere and its haste—notwithstanding the revolution's profession of independence—to take all the help it could obtain from the Soviet Union or anywhere else.

Today what is most readily apparent in Cuba is that the pervasive fear of the 1960s has abated. It has been replaced by a sustaining self-confidence and pride; despite the threat from the North, Cubans say and their attitudes seem to imply, that the revolution is secure and its goals can be sought in relative safety.

Over time Cuban leadership has come to believe the pledge against future invasions which the United States gave in settlement of the 1962 missile crisis. In this time of détente, the Soviet Union probably has provided a tempering influence. Cuban officials now believe that CIA operations to overthrow the regime or assassinate its leaders have been ended. They feel free, therefore, to invite diplomatic contacts with the United States, which they have done. They have been forced to vest their energies and resources in internal development. And this they have done with a nearly single-minded concentration.

One or two of the newsmen who accompanied me on the trip referred to my Cuban agenda (a copy is appended) as a "showcase tour." It should not be surprising that the Cubans sought to show us their best. It is not our own practice to take foreign visitors to our most over-crowded prisons, our most vandalized schools, or our worst slums. In fact our schedule followed the general outlines I had requested in advance. We saw what we had requested. There is no way on a brief visit to make certain of everything which has been done or to measure all the differences between aspiration and accomplishment. Rather I wanted to see significant accomplishments, to form some idea of the spirit of the nation, its objectives, and its general direction—and beyond all this I wanted to visit with Fidel Castro.

Aside from political discussions, my primary interest was in agriculture. It is a primary interest of Cuba, too. Accordingly, after a brief reception at the airport, we spent our first evening in a comprehensive briefing at the Agricultural Ministry.

A drum roll of statistics, typically with 1959 as the base year, was sounded to demonstrate the agricultural "triumphs of the revolution." In 1959 one percent of the people owned 50 percent of the land. Now 70 percent is owned by the state—or, as the Cubans would put it, the people collectively—and the rest is in plots of 67 hectares or less (1 hectare equals 2.47 acres). In 1959 there were 8,400 tractors in the country. Now there are more than 50,000. Each statistic—land under irrigation, crop output, annual egg production (overall and per hen), milk and calf production—claimed similar gains.

The obvious progress which has occurred reflects huge state investments in agriculture, which is a national priority and a personal interest of Prime Minister Castro. He exhibited far more than a layman's knowledge when, on the second full day of our visit, he led us on a tour of a research project in which holsteins and zebus are being cross-bred to develop a milk cow which will produce well in a tropical climate. The shelves in his office are lined with technical works on farming. His expertise would impress any American farmer or rancher.

Agricultural development is the determining variable of a comprehensive national planning and economic reorganization program. Soil is tested and rainfall is analyzed to determine scientifically which crops should be cultivated where. Then transportation, processing plants, housing, even whole communities are structured to serve the agricultural sector. Quite literally, Cuban society is being redesigned from the ground up.

But I suspect that agriculture will also remain an unresolved problem for Cuba. When we were there the country was in its twenty-

seventh month of a drought which has caused sharp cutbacks of production goals. Beyond that, I think the collective system will prove deficient on structural grounds—that over the long run it will exhibit the same basic limitations of a system dominated by massive private monopolies. Though the Cubans will not easily accept this reality—indeed, they regard such criticism and its implications as “counter-revolutionary”—a system of smaller, family-operated units would probably make more sense. In fact, despite incentives such as low-cost housing and free health care and education, a substantial number of small farmers still refuse to sell their holdings to the state. There were even occasional guarded admissions that these private family farms are comparatively more productive than the collectives.

Other economic sectors are experiencing similar if less intense development. We toured Cuba's one steel mill which, with technical and financial assistance from the Soviet Union, is being expanded to raise output toward self-sufficiency in steel. Scrap collected in Cuba is supplemented with raw materials from the Soviet Union. The mill looks, sounds and smells like steel mills in the United States—down to the posters urging safety on the job.

The oil wells along the coastline represent an attempt for self-sufficiency in a different sector. This venture has been unsuccessful so far. A few pumps were operating, but most of them were idle because cost of operation exceeds the value of expected production. Cuban technicians believe there is oil offshore, but lack the equipment to drill there. Consequently most of Cuba's petroleum supplies are imported.

To pay for these imports and others, Cuba has moved effectively to improve its balance of trade. Exports, especially sugar and nickel, are increasing. The Cubans are seeking, and to a noticeable extent securing, a sizeable share of Caribbean tourism. Canadian tourists, for example, are surprisingly numerous.

There is no unemployment in Cuba; on the contrary, labor shortages are a chronic problem. Prime Minister Castro has promised many times to end the backbreaking labor of cutting sugar cane. That promise has not yet been fulfilled, but mechanization is well underway.

The lowest rate of pay in Cuba is 85 pesos a month, approximately \$102.00. The highest is 570 pesos, or \$674.00. But health care, education, transportation, and other basic services are free. Inflation is nearly non-existent because rationing instead of price increases reconciles shortages and consumer demand. Rent is low, set with some adjustments at an average 10 percent of earnings. Most families have more than one breadwinner. So, our guides told us, while no Cubans live luxuriously, all can live decently. Beyond dispute, the standard of living for the average Cuban family has improved sharply since 1959, and at an accelerated pace in recent years.

There was no effort to convince us that there is progress on every front. But any visitor to Cuba will find progress in many areas, and a carefully cultivated popular sense of involvement in each success.

Cuban directions in social services—health, education, and housing—were especially intriguing.

According to members of our party who had seen it before, the large psychiatric hospital in Havana has been dramatically transformed since the Batista regime. It would probably compare favorably with first rate psychiatric facilities in the United States. Before the revolu-

tion, it was simply a dreary storage compound for the mentally disturbed. Today it is an active therapy center, with patient care based on the same work ethic that guides Cuban society as a whole. Most patients are employed—making shoes, building furniture and toys, braiding rope, painting, maintaining the grounds, even guarding the gates. The therapy also attempts to minimize the distinctions between the patients and the rest of society. They are paid for their work, and since health care is free they can use their earnings to help support their families.

We next toured a large, modern technical school where individual labor was an integral part of the training process. Our host, Minister of Education Jose Fernandez, explained that each pupil spends three hours a day outside the classroom and on a job. In the school itself we saw a small assembly line turning out radios. Elementary students tend gardens. Every student who can work does something.

I found it interesting that Cubans attribute this work-study ethic not to Marxist ideology but to the philosophy of Jose Marti, the leader of Cuba's struggle for independence from Spain. They also draw from his principles, as well as from current government policy, the abiding conviction that education is a precondition to national growth and social justice. They say they will spare no expense or effort in providing each student with the most learning he can absorb, so that he may realize his maximum potential, for himself and for the nation.

In housing, the first priority is the construction of new apartment complexes near collective farms, sugar refineries, cigar factories, or other workplaces. In effect these are "new towns," self-contained communities with schools, day care centers, grocery stores, local transportation, motion picture theaters, and baseball parks. For example, East of Havana, the Alamar housing project which we visited will eventually house 415,000 people. About 50,000 live there now. We toured a grocery store in the project. Shoppers had few choices, but the store was well stocked with staples. As one member of our party observed, "baby food, yes; Screaming Yellow Zonkers, no." Our next stop was a day-care center, which was of particular interest to my wife Eleanor. Our visit was shortened because the television cameras frightened the children. But after the reporters left, Eleanor remained for as long as time would permit. As one with broad experience in the area of early childhood development, she concluded that the East of Havana center was advanced and sensitively conducted.

The apartment buildings in the complex were generally five or six stories high and constructed of prefabricated concrete slabs. There was some variety in design and much in color. Throughout Cuba, housing is under construction by some 29,000 members of so-called "mini-brigades," composed of units of thirty-two members each selected by their fellow workers for a leave of absence from their regular jobs. One project, for example, is being constructed by employees of the foreign service.

Cuban progress is not a vindication of the Communist system as such. That progress has been founded on massive infusions of aid and concessional trade arrangements from the Soviet Union. It has been spurred by a windfall rise in world sugar prices. And the Cuban people have had to pay a heavy price—there is a floor under every

individual's income, but there is also a ceiling on individual initiative and aspiration; there is freedom from poverty, at least relative to the past, but there are also restrictions on intellectual and political freedom.

Yet on balance, the vast majority of Cubans probably would choose what they have now over what they had before. Prime Minister Castro exercises unquestioned authority. But we also saw abundant evidence that he is genuinely popular. He took power by force, but he seems to sustain it at least partly by the appeal of personality and quality of performance. The last Cuban dictatorship was not at all benevolent. It was widely feared and hated. This one is obviously different.

The difference is underscored by the fact that paintings and sculptures in Cuba pay tribute to Jose Marti, to Lenin, or to Che Guevara, while a likeness of Fidel Castro is rarely seen. When people perceive their leader as a national hero there is no need for him to proclaim it.

Cuba also demonstrates that broad political changes do not necessarily displace cultures. In fact, no apparent effort has been made to impose cultural changes, even where aspects of Cuban society evolved over long years of contact with the United States.

In sports, baseball is not only the national pastime; it is close to a national passion. The players are not professionals; instead they are released from their regular jobs during the season. But after watching a few innings of a championship game, I came away convinced that they could give our major league teams a good run for their money. We saw Prime Minister Castro for the first time later on that same evening, and during our conversation an aide came in to tell him that his Oriente province team had lost to Havana by one run in the thirteenth inning. His expression displayed the disappointment of a truly committed fan.

Cuban music sounds familiar. Old standards have been combined with new praises of the revolution. We heard excellent musical performances from both the patients at the psychiatric institute and students at the technical school. A loudspeaker in the courtyard at the steel mill played nonstop music—both Cuban and some fairly recent American tunes. The walls of the charming restaurant El Bodeguito del Medio in old Havana are covered with clippings and autographs recalling the presence of American celebrities including Ernest Hemingway, Dorothy Kilgallen and Errol Flynn. The restaurant also features some of the best guitar music I have ever heard, from the same musicians who were playing there when Fidel Castro was fighting in the Sierra Maestra mountains.

This self-proclaimed proletarian country also retains a taste for elegance. The mixture was exemplified by Ramon Castro, the Prime Minister's brother who lives in a trailer and runs agricultural programs in the Picadura Valley. He greeted us in a workshirt with rolled-up sleeves, his cheeks burned red from hours in the sun. But he was our gracious host at a beautiful government protocol house overlooking the valley, where waiters served, in crystal and fine china, a delicious meal of lobster, chicken, and Chilean wine—left over, we were assured, from the days of Allende. Another long luncheon, hosted by Education Minister Jose Fernandez, was served at Las Ruinas, a magnificent public restaurant with stained glass windows, which encloses the carefully maintained ruins of an old fortress. We were told

that the prices were within reach of most Cubans, but only for special family occasions.

So much of what we experienced in Cuba was familiar. We were driven in small Argentine-made Fords, and we saw Cubans in pre-1960 American cars with tail-fins and chrome. We talked with writers and intellectuals who idolized Ernest Hemingway. Cubans dress much like Americans and obviously according to individual taste. Sports clothes and mini-skirts abound.

The guides who were assigned to accompany us on formal visits to Cuban institutions also proved to be exceptional guides to the informal aspects of the Cuban spirit. We came to know best a small group of relatively young people who work with Prime Minister Castro on questions concerning the United States. They were talented, competent, and committed. They were also warm and relaxed. Within a few hours of our arrival, they and members of my family and my staff were exchanging life stories, arguing social philosophy, and swapping jokes. My family and I and members of our staff developed a genuine affection and admiration for them.

Obviously, Cuba subscribes to some principles we cannot accept. Yet in more than geography, Cuba remains close to the United States. Cuba in 1975 appears to be advancing economically and maturing politically. From a position of internal strength, Cuba's leaders feel sufficiently secure to move away from the hostility of an earlier time toward peaceful relations with the United States and Latin American nations.

In the beginning the embargo inflicted grave wounds on the Cuban economy. But it also gave the Castro government a cause to rally the Cuban people and left it with no choice except dependence on another outside power. Today the embargo makes far less difference on both counts. For Cuba it is no longer as harmful economically, as helpful politically, or as important internationally.

Cuba's foreign policy has moderated not because of our hostility, but in spite of it. Now, despite bitter but fading hostilities on both sides, older human ties and the dictates of common sense are reasserting themselves.

The two countries do not necessarily need each other. But if they are honest, both will admit that they are interested in each other and could benefit from friendly relations. Neighbors may go separate ways. But at least they ought to communicate.

III. CONVERSATIONS WITH FIDEL CASTRO

It is sometimes hard to remember that Fidel Castro does not—indeed, he could not—rule Cuba alone. He is surrounded by a number of exceptional people. The tall, athletic Education Minister, Jose Fernandez, speaks with contagious enthusiasm about both the practice and the philosophy of education in Cuba. In 1961 he was the tactical commander of Cuba's forces at the Bay of Pigs. Dr. Bernave Ordaz at the Psychiatric Institute is also a man of independent force. Dr. Carlos Rafael Rodriguez, the Vice Prime Minister, combines gentility and obvious brilliance. Jesus Montane Oropesa who met us at the Havana air terminal was with Fidel in the Oriente mountains.

We were just finishing a dinner hosted by Dr. Rodriguez and Foreign Minister Raul Roa at one of Havana's protocol houses—most of them former homes of wealthy Cubans, now maintained for entertaining foreign guests. It was our second evening in Cuba. We had come to the country hoping to see the Prime Minister and assuming that we would, but without any specific arrangements in advance. I had been troubled by indications that he would probably not see us until Thursday evening, which would have meant only a short talk or a possible delay in our departure.

The conversation with Dr. Rodriguez had turned to the possibility of an American major league baseball team playing in Cuba, a hemispheric version of ping-pong diplomacy. At about 11:00 p.m. an aide came in and spoke privately to our host. Dr. Rodriguez abruptly pushed his chair back from the table and announced that the Prime Minister had stopped by to pay his respects and was waiting to see us. We immediately adjourned to the patio for coffee.

The reality of Fidel Castro matches the popular image. He was, as always, dressed in freshly pressed, well tailored military fatigues. Well built and youthful in appearance at the age of 48; hair and beard still black. An air of confidence and poise, but a perpetually inquisitive expression. All in all a compelling, charismatic presence.

As the conversation started, I discovered another side of his personality. Mr. Castro is shy, soft-spoken, and sensitive. He arranges his thoughts and chooses his words carefully. He quickly grasps each nuance of meaning, and responds knowledgeably and at length to questions on virtually any subject.

This first meeting was only to get acquainted.

"You served during the war?" he asked.

"Yes, as a bomber pilot making raids from Italy against the Nazis."

"How long did it take for one of those raids?"

"Sometimes twelve or thirteen hours. Our raids were directed against oilfields, factories, railroad centers and other strategic targets. They were high risk missions. I lost many close friends."

Castro observed that the experience must have helped to motivate my efforts against the Vietnam War and for international peace. He spoke of the 1972 campaign, expressing keen interest in the reform movement within the Democratic party and in the political activism of American youth. His questions revealed that he is well-informed and watches American politics very closely.

We did not discuss the substantive issues of Cuban-American relations in this first talk, although I did raise the point that one way to move toward better relations would be an exchange of baseball teams.

"That has already been suggested," he said.

We learned that over time there have been a number of discussions about the possibility of an American team playing in Cuba. Subsequently the Cuban sports ministry presented a memorandum which outlined past discussions with Americans who have been interested in the project. The U.S. State Department would have to validate passports, and Castro told us that this had been the obstacle.

I also gave the Cuban leader a letter I had brought with me from Senator Edward Brooke of Massachusetts, which urged him to permit the parents of Boston Red Sox pitcher Luis Tiant to travel to the United States to see their son in a major league game.

"That should be no problem," Castro said. "We will look into this matter and give you a definite answer."

After an hour Castro said we would meet again the next day, though he offered no details about time or place. I urged him to meet also with members of the American press who had come with us. He said there were too many for individual interviews, so I suggested a press conference. He answered that he would consider it.

Like the first encounter, our second meeting came as a surprise. We had driven fifty miles southeast of Havana for a late lunch with the Prime Minister's brother, Ramon. When we were ready to leave, the cars seemed to be missing. Our guides, who were in on the secret, feigned impatience with the drivers for making us wait.

After a few minutes, the serenity of the hilltop was broken by the rumble of Russian-made jeeps rounding the corner of the driveway. They came to a halt directly in front of us. Castro was in the lead jeep. He greeted his brother and exchanged pleasantries with the group; then he invited Eleanor and me to tour the valley.

"Before you answer," he cautioned, "I want you to know that I'm going to drive."

He put on his glasses with mock gravity, and off we went down the hillside in a motorized caravan, followed by the missing cars which had reappeared on cue. At the bottom of the hill, buses carrying the press corps joined us.

We toured the valley for the next three and a half hours, stopping briefly at an experimental dairy farm, a cattle ranch, and a scenic overlook. It occurred to me that someone on the Castro staff had a press secretary's eye for "photo opportunities" and "media events." Cuban officials are not practiced at dealing with a free press, but they know the value of publicity.

The Prime Minister supplied a running commentary on the progress of his favorite agricultural research projects. Castro also spoke with admiration of American agriculture, and of the need for rural development throughout the world.

"The United States is critical in the development of agriculture worldwide. You have the greatest farm output in the world and you can help guide the development of other countries."

We discussed a number of subjects on the long drive back to Havana. I told him of speculation in the United States that Cuban agents may have been involved in the assassination of President Kennedy. He responded in disbelief. "We had troubles with the Kennedy Administration. But it is monstrous even to contemplate that we would murder the head of state of any nation—to say nothing of being so foolish as to incur the wrath of a great power like the United States." Then he added: "Before that man Oswald killed President Kennedy he tried to get a visa at our embassy in Mexico City to visit Cuba. His application was refused. I have often thought that if we had admitted him, many people might have blamed us for what he did."

At the same time he told me, as Mr. Rodriguez had before, that they were aware of the CIA efforts to assassinate them—as many as a hundred attempts, they said, although not all were attributed to the CIA.

Apparently he has no real fear of such plots now. Prime Minister Castro moves easily among the Cuban people. At my suggestion we

stopped at a village ice cream stand, which began turning out cones as quickly as possible for our party and for the children who clustered around. The Prime Minister attempted to pay, but a local official insisted that we were guests of the community.

Castro talked and joked with the people who gathered quickly when our caravan arrived. His security men made no attempt to block off the crowd; in fact, they seemed to stay closer to the jeeps and the radios than to the Prime Minister. We went inside an apartment building, and one of the families we met insisted that Eleanor stay for refreshments—where we finally found her after everyone else had boarded the vehicles and was waiting to leave.

On the way back we stopped at a rum factory on the outskirts of Havana. Castro led us into one of the large steel buildings containing endless racks of rum in wooden kegs. Waiters appeared and offered samples. It was a strong variety of which no one could take more than a taste.

Castro delivered us at the hotel at 8:30 p.m. He had scheduled a press conference for an hour later, and would see us again at 10:30 for more substantive discussions.

The Prime Minister greeted us immediately after his session with the reporters and escorted us into his office. Through the American press, Castro had delivered a message to the U.S. Government, and another to the American people. He had refined his position on the embargo in an effort to be more accommodating to the American posture. Pending the complete removal of the embargo, discussions with the United States could move ahead if we would only lift our effective ban on trade in food and medicine. To the American people he extended in English “. . . a wish of friendship. I understand it is not easy, because we belong to different worlds. But we are neighbors. In one way or another we ought to live in peace.”

We were seated around an oblong table in the Prime Minister's office. Before taking up the direct questions of relations between the United States and Cuba, we heard his views on other international concerns—particularly the Middle East and Southeast Asia.

On the Middle East, I described the outlines of a possible settlement which I had proposed after a trip to that area earlier this year—the full recognition of Israel in exchange for Israel's return to its 1967 borders, with practical modifications, and recognition of Palestinian self-determination. Castro felt that such a formula would bring peace, and that the Israelis—who are “wise people”—might be ready to accept it. He added: “The Arabs dislike the step-by-step approach, the so-called Kissinger formula. It tends to divide them.”

He told us that he expected no “blood bath” in South Vietnam:

The Vietnam conflict was primarily a struggle for independence against foreign domination. When the foreigners left, the fighting ceased. I don't believe the PRG realized how quickly the end would come. What happens next depends a great deal on U.S. policy. If the United States sponsors and supports subversive activities against the new government, then the situation could change. The reunification of North and South will take a few years. Vietnam will not be a typical socialist state. They will be mindful of public opinion in the United States and around the world.

I mentioned the reports of executions and forced relocations in Cambodia. Castro said he was "not sure" about Cambodia: "We don't have any news; don't know the source of that report. Cambodia had more of the characteristics of a civil war, with more bitterness among the Cambodians themselves. It may be a different matter than Vietnam."

I moved the discussion to Cuban-American issues by saying that I would not waste my time defending the embargo; Castro already knew of my opposition to it, and so did the United States Government. Instead, I suggested that we should concentrate on steps which might help improve relations between the two countries. At the same time I made it clear that I had no authority to negotiate on behalf of the United States—that I had come to listen and learn in the hope that I could make some contribution to the normalization process.

Chairman Sparkman of the Foreign Relations Committee had given me a letter to the Cuban Government on behalf of a small Atlanta-based airline—Southern Airways—which had been unable to secure repayment of a \$2 million ransom which hijackers had taken with them to Cuba. I argued that it would be a strong gesture of good will if Cuba would arrange for repayment. The Prime Minister said he was very impressed with the reasoning in Senator Sparkman's letter and that he was "... personally inclined to respond positively; but more for you than for the United States Government. We don't want to appear in the role of begging."

To Castro this has become an important distinction. He feels Cuba has gone "the extra mile" to accommodate the United States, but that there has not been meaningful reciprocation. Any additional steps would have to be justified not as further gestures to the United States Government, but as courtesies to individual Americans who favor a change in American policy. His view was summed up in a discussion of the hijacking agreement:

We took honest, rational and constructive action. But we didn't link it to our internal interests. Then the other party, the United States, did not take any important steps to help us. It would have been much more tactical to link the treaty to the blockade. Now we are a little bit skeptical of the good will of the United States Government. Maybe sometimes we react with a little pride. We could resist the blockade for another fifteen years. But nobody would profit from that.

I noted that games in Cuba between American and Cuban baseball or basketball teams could fall into a people-to-people, rather than intergovernmental, category. By this time, in response to my raising the issue the night before, he had reviewed the previous private American initiatives. Once again he welcomed the idea, and assured us that ballplayers would receive a warm greeting.

"People here respect American athletes," he said. "And in a political sense, they know that if U.S. athletes are not treated well, the country loses."

After my return from Cuba, I wrote to Secretary of State Kissinger to explore the current State Department position on this question. A copy of my letter and his response are appended to this report. I have had further discussions with Assistant Secretary William Rogers, and I am hopeful that appropriate visa arrangements can be worked out.

Prime Minister Castro and I also discussed the situation of eight American prisoners in Cuba who have been of particular concern to the United States Government. While I could not judge individual cases, I argued that the prisoners had been confined in Cuba for a long time, and that it would advance the prospects of normalization if they were released. I said that this magnanimous, unilateral step would demonstrate not weakness but strength—the strength to forgive enemies. He wanted to know how many I thought he should release.

“All of them?” he asked.

“That would be the strongest gesture.”

He laughed.

“But then what would I do when Senator Kennedy comes?”

Castro recalled that Cuba had once offered to exchange four of these prisoners for the four Puerto Ricans who were convicted of a shooting incident in the gallery of the House of Representatives during the Truman Administration. For reasons which he did not make clear, that proposal had made no progress.

Then at 12:15 a.m., he looked at his watch and suggested that we have dinner.

We drove from the Palace to a house in the Havana suburbs. But instead of going in we were led around back to a basketball court. Next to the court, a lamb was being barbecued whole over an open pit, with a large chicken thrown in for good measure. As Castro explained, the dinner was Algerian in origin.

“They prepared it for me during one of my visits there. I believe you have a lot of sheep in South Dakota, so I thought this would be appropriate.”

Still on a skewer, the lamb was carried to a table. Castro explained: “The tradition is to eat it with your fingers. Use just one hand, to keep the other free for wine. I suggest you start about here.” It was a delicious and relaxed meal, although Castro remarked that because he had kept us too long at the palace the lamb was slightly overcooked.

I wondered why the nagging issue of our naval base at Guantanamo had not been mentioned at any time during our visit, by Castro or any other official. For many years the Cubans had cited the base and the embargo as the essential barriers to normal relations with the United States, yet no one had even spoken the word “Guantanamo” to us. During dinner, I decided to raise it myself.

“If you ask the average Cuban,” Castro replied, “he will probably tell you that a foreign nation should not have a military base on our soil. But I will tell you that it is a secondary issue, a secondary issue. We are not pressing that matter now.”

He did not suggest that he has come to accept the base. Rather in his mind it is an issue which can be resolved at a later time. Since the possibility that Guantanamo could become a Soviet base is a major concern of American strategists, one answer might be a neutralization arrangement under which no major power would use the facility for military purposes.

We also discussed Castro's view of the 1962 missile crisis.

“I would have taken a harder line than Khrushchev. I was furious when he compromised. But Khrushchev was older and wiser. I realize in retrospect that he reached the proper settlement with Kennedy. If my position had prevailed, there might have been a terrible war. I was wrong.”

At 2:30 a.m. we ended our dinner and went off for a late drive through downtown Havana. Castro said crime is no longer a problem, and he noted the absence of uniformed policemen. He is proud that the crime syndicates are gone and that gambling and prostitution have ended. Shortly after 3 a.m. we were back at the hotel.

Altogether Prime Minister Castro had given us nine hours of his time—a major gesture in itself. I doubt that an American President has often been so accessible to a foreign visitor, especially one of lesser official status.

Mr. Castro leaves mingled impressions. It is, for example, abundantly clear that he will not yield to American pressure. It can only be counterproductive. Based on their own assessment of the current situation, the authorities in Cuba have decided to seek *détente* with the United States. That is a major policy decision. A conciliatory response can bring improved relations between our two countries and contribute to the long-term security of the Western Hemisphere; a continued hard line can only perpetuate needless hostility.

Fidel Castro is walking a narrow line. Just hours after my departure, he spoke at a celebration of the 30th anniversary of the end of World War II. This time the visiting delegation was made up of high officials from the Soviet Union. Castro denounced “Yankee imperialism,” and lavished praise on the role of the Soviet Union—in World War II and since—as the world’s principal guardian against fascism and the defender of global peace. Mr. Castro plainly will not risk the loss of Soviet support in order to court the United States.

But I take as most revealing of all the answers he gave during our discussions his response—his admission of error—on the Cuban missile crisis. For he was reflecting not only on a single event, but was pointing to his own growing maturity and capacity for reasoned discourse.

When Castro began the Cuban revolution he was in his twenties. At the time of the missile crisis in 1962, he was 35. Today he is 48. I think the years and the challenges of national leadership have matured Fidel Castro just as they have matured his revolution. Now, even if his rhetoric is still sometimes hard to accept, he is leading his nation in tempered, more responsible ways. He is shaping the convictions of his countrymen and the policy of his country toward progress at home and *détente* abroad. Despite the rhetoric, that is the reality of Cuba in 1975.

APPENDIX 1

ITINERARY

MONDAY, MAY 5

- 12:45 p.m.—Departed Capitol for Andrews Air Force Base.
1:30 p.m.—Departed Andrews Air Force Base.
3:40 p.m.—Arrived Homestead Air Force Base, Miami, Fla.
4:00 p.m.—Departed Homestead Air Force Base.
5:30 p.m.—Arrived José Martí International Airport, Havana, Cuba.
Received by Jesus Montane Oropesa, close adviser of Prime Minister Fidel Castro. Brief reception at the Diplomatic Quarters at the airport, including discussion of scheduled events.
6:30 p.m.—Tour of National Agrarian Reform Institute offices with a detailed briefing on Cuban agriculture. Accompanied by Cuban officials: Daniel Solana Pinera, Vice President, National Agrarian Reform Institute; Adolfo Cossio Recio, Director General of Foreign Relations, National Agrarian Reform Institute; Angel Estrada Acosta, Director General of Economics, National Agrarian Reform Institute; Jlidio Sabatier Aeanda, Director of Planning, National Agrarian Reform Institute; and Pablo Romero, Director, Regional Planning Institute.
9:00 p.m.—Checked in at the Hotel Riviera, downtown Havana.
10:30 p.m.—Informal dinner at the El Bodequito del Medio Restaurant.
12:30 p.m.—Returned to the Hotel Riviera.

TUESDAY, MAY 6

- 9:00 a.m.—Tour of Havana's psychiatric hospital given by Dr. Bernave Ordaz, Director of the hospital, and Dr. Pedro Azcuy, Assistant Vice Minister of Public Health.
11:15 a.m.—Tour of V. I. Lenin Vocational School in suburbs of Havana by Jose Ramon Fernandez Alvarez, Minister of Education.
1:30 p.m.—Lunch at Las Ruinas Restaurant, given by José Ramón Fernández Alvarez.
4:00 p.m.—Returned to the Hotel Riviera.
6:00 p.m.—Courtesy call on Ambassador Schnyder, Swiss Embassy.
7:30 p.m.—Returned to the Hotel Riviera.
8:30 p.m.—Went to Estadio Latino Americano and watched two innings of championship baseball game between teams representing Havana and Oriente.

ITINERARY—Continued

- 9:30 p.m.—Arrived at one of the Cuban Government diplomatic residences for dinner with Carlos Rafael Rodríguez Rodríguez, Vice Prime Minister of Foreign Relations; Raul Roa, Foreign Minister; and Jesus Montane Oropesa, an adviser.
- 11:15 p.m.—Prime Minister Fidel Castro arrived following dinner.
- 12:30 a.m.—Returned to the Hotel Riviera.

WEDNESDAY, MAY 7

- 8:30 a.m.—Press conference with Senator McGovern.
- 9:30 a.m.—Tour of Alamar Housing Project, including visits to a day-care center and a supermarket.
- 12:00 p.m.—Tour of the “José Martí” steel mill, Cotorro, Havana, Cuba, accompanied by the following officials: Juan Sánchez Utrera, Business Manager; Francisco Díaz Tarajano, Director, Economic Department; Alfredo Uguet Bohorques, Vice Director of Production; and Danilo Michel, Technical Director.
- 2:45 p.m.—Lunch with Ramon Castro, who directs the agriculture and livestock program for the area, at “Protocol House”, Valle de la Picadura.
- 4:45 p.m.—Tour of Picadura Valley conducted by Prime Minister Fidel Castro with brief stops at a dairy farm and cattle breeding ranch. Stop also made at the town of Nuevo Jibacao.
- 7:30 p.m.—Brief tour of Ronera Santa Cruz, a rum factory on the outskirts of Havana.
- 8:30 p.m.—Returned to the Hotel Riviera.
- 9:30 p.m.—Press conference with Prime Minister Fidel Castro.
- 10:30 p.m.—Private meeting with Prime Minister Castro.
- 12:15 a.m.—Dinner with Prime Minister Castro at one of the Cuban Government’s diplomatic residences in Havana.
- 3:00 a.m.—Returned to the Hotel Riviera.

THURSDAY, MAY 8

- 9:00 a.m.—Press conference with Senator McGovern.
- 11:15 a.m.—Tour of the Museo de la Revolution.
- 12:45 p.m.—Meeting with students at Havana University.
- 2:15 p.m.—Returned to the Hotel Riviera.
- 4:00 p.m.—Departed Hotel Riviera.
- 5:15 p.m.—Departed Jose Marti International Airport.
- 6:45 p.m.—Departed Homestead Air Force Base.
- 8:50 p.m.—Arrived Andrews Air Force Base.

APPENDIX 2

CORRESPONDENCE CONCERNING BASEBALL EXCHANGE

MAY 13, 1975.

HON. HENRY KISSINGER,
Secretary of State, Department of State,
Washington, D.C.

DEAR MR. SECRETARY: During my trip to Cuba last week I discussed at some length with Prime Minister Castro the idea of American baseball and basketball teams playing Cuban teams. As you know, both countries are exceptionally enthusiastic about these two sports. I believe such an exchange, beginning with games in Havana, could be a very useful, if informal, step toward improved relations.

Prime Minister Castro and other Cuban officials were very receptive to the idea. They told me that from their point of view there would be no obstacles, so long as suitable arrangements could be made in the United States.

Before it can be pursued further, it seems to me that it is necessary to have some assurance that trips to Havana by American teams would be permitted by the Department of State. Therefore, I would very much appreciate your advice on whether the Department would assist in this endeavor, at least to the extent of validating passports for travel to Cuba. Given schedules of teams in the United States, it seems to me that it would be possible to have a major college basketball team play in Cuba in the near future, and that perhaps the baseball exchange could take place later in the summer.

With appreciation for your assistance, I am
Sincerely,

GEORGE MCGOVERN.

DEPARTMENT OF STATE,
Washington, D.C., May 29, 1975.

HON. GEORGE MCGOVERN,
United States Senate,
Washington, D.C.

DEAR SENATOR MCGOVERN: The Secretary has asked me to reply to your May 13 letter about basketball and baseball exchanges with Cuba. We greatly appreciate your interest in this matter and our ideas on the types of exchanges of athletic teams that could be organized.

As you may know, we have not wholly excluded athletic exchanges with Cuba in the past. We have validated passports for American athletes and granted visas to Cuban athletes when failure to do so would prejudice their Olympic standings.

There are some aspects in the whole question of exchanges of professional level baseball players and college level basketball players which are complicated by our overall policy toward Cuba.

We would appreciate it if you or someone on your staff got in touch with Bill Rogers and his people regarding specific exchange possibilities should the occasion arise.

Sincerely,

ROBERT J. McCLOSKEY,
Assistant Secretary, for Congressional Relations.

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CORRESPONDENCE CONCERNING BASKETBALL EXCHANGE

MAY 12, 1971

Hon. Henry Kissinger,

Secretary of State, Department of State,

Washington, D.C.

Dear Mr. Secretary: During my trip to Cuba last week, I discussed at some length with Prime Minister Castro the idea of American basketball and basketball teams playing Cuban teams. As you know, both countries are exceptionally enthusiastic about these two sports. I believe such an exchange beginning with games in Havana, could be a very useful informal step toward improved relations.

Prime Minister Castro and other Cuban officials were very receptive to the idea. They told me that from their point of view, there would be no obstacles so long as such arrangements could be made in the United States.

Before it can be pursued further, it is necessary that it is necessary to have some serious discussions with the U.S. State Department. I would be delighted by the Department of State. Therefore, I would be glad to discuss the question of whether the Department would be interested in this project. At least to the extent of making arrangements for travel to Cuba. Given the nature of the project, it seems to me that it would be possible to have a major college basketball game played in Cuba in the near future, and that perhaps the basketball exchange could take place later in the summer.

With appreciation for your assistance, I am,

Sincerely,

Robert J. McCloskey

Department of State

Washington, D.C. May 20, 1971

Hon. George McGovern,

United States Senate,

Washington, D.C.

Dear Senator McGovern: The Secretary has asked me to reply to your May 12 letter about basketball and baseball exchange. I am greatly appreciative of your interest in this matter and our ideas of the types of exchange of which it is possible to be organized.

As you may know, we have not wholly excluded athletic exchanges with Cuba in the past. We have validated passport for American athletes and granted visas to Cuban athletes when failure to do so would prejudice their Olympic standings.

There are some aspects in the whole question of exchanges of professional level basketball players and college level basketball players which are complicated by our overall policy toward Cuba.

