A Brief History of America's Cold-Blooded, Terroristic Treatment of Cuba

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The establishment of diplomatic ties between the US and Cuba has been widely hailed as an event of historic importance. Correspondent John Lee Anderson, who has written perceptively about the region, sums up a general reaction among liberal intellectuals when he writes, in the New Yorker, that:

> "Barack Obama has shown that he can act as a statesman of historic heft. And so, at this moment, has Raúl Castro. For Cubans, this moment will be emotionally cathartic as well as historically transformational. Their relationship with their wealthy, powerful northern American neighbor has remained frozen in the nineteen-sixties for fifty years. To a surreal degree, their destinies have been frozen as well. For Americans, this is important, too. Peace with Cuba takes us momentarily back to that golden time when the United States was a beloved nation throughout the world, when a young and handsome J.F.K. was in office-before Vietnam, before Allende, before Iraq and all the other miseries — and allows us to feel proud about ourselves for finally doing the right thing."

The past is not quite as idyllic as it is portrayed in the persisting Camelot image. JFK was not "before Vietnam" – or even before Allende and Iraq, but let us put that aside. In Vietnam, when JFK entered office the brutality of the Diem regime that the US had imposed had elicited domestic resistance that it could not control. Kennedy was therefore confronted by what he called an "assault from the inside," "internal aggression" in the interesting phrase favored by his UN Ambassador Adlai Stevenson.

Kennedy therefore at once escalated the US intervention to outright aggression, ordering the US Air Force to bomb South Vietnam (under South Vietnamese markings, which deceived no one), authorizing napalm and chemical warfare to destroy crops and livestock, and launching programs to drive peasants into virtual concentration camps to "protect them" from the guerrillas whom Washington knew they were mostly supporting.

By 1963, reports from the ground seemed to indicate that Kennedy's war was succeeding, but a serious problem arose. In August, the administration learned that the Diem government was seeking negotiations with the North to end the conflict.

If JFK had had the slightest intention to withdraw, that would have been a perfect opportunity to do so gracefully, with no political cost, even claiming, in the usual style, that it was American fortitude and principled defense of freedom that compelled the North Vietnamese to surrender. Instead, Washington backed a military coup to install hawkish generals more attuned to JFK's actual commitments; President Diem and his brother were murdered in the process. With victory apparently within sight, Kennedy reluctantly accepted a proposal by Defense Secretary Robert McNamara to begin withdrawing troops (NSAM 263), but only with a crucial proviso: After Victory. Kennedy maintained that demand insistently until his assassination a few weeks later. Many illusions have been concocted about these events, but they collapse quickly under the weight of the rich documentary record.

The story elsewhere was also not quite as idyllic as in the Camelot legends. One of the most consequential of Kennedy's decisions was in 1962, when he effectively shifted the mission of the Latin American military from "hemispheric defense" — a holdover from World War II — to "internal security," a euphemism for war against the domestic enemy, the population. The results were described by Charles Maechling, who led US counterinsurgency and internal defense planning from 1961 to 1966. Kennedy's decision, he wrote, shifted US policy from toleration "of the rapacity and cruelty of the Latin American military" to "direct complicity" in their crimes, to US support for "the methods of Heinrich Himmler's extermination squads." Those who do not prefer what international relations specialist Michael Glennon called "intentional ignorance" can easily ll in the details.

In Cuba, Kennedy inherited Eisenhower's policy of embargo and formal plans to overthrow the regime, and quickly escalated them with the Bay of Pigs invasion. The failure of the invasion caused near hysteria in Washington. At the first cabinet meeting after the failed invasion, the atmosphere was "almost savage,"

Under Secretary of State Chester Bowles noted privately: "there was an almost frantic reaction for an action program." Kennedy articulated the hysteria in his public pronouncements: "The complacent, the self-indulgent, the soft societies are about to be swept away with the debris of history. Only the strong … can possibly survive," he told the country, though was aware, as he said privately, that allies "think that we're slightly demented" on the subject of Cuba. Not without reason.

Kennedy's actions were true to his words. He launched a murderous terrorist campaign designed to bring "the terrors of the earth" to Cuba — historian and Kennedy adviser Arthur Schlesinger's phrase, referring to the project assigned by the president to his brother Robert Kennedy as his highest priority. Apart from killing thousands of people along with large-scale destruction, the terrors of the earth were a major factor in bringing the world to the brink of a terminal nuclear war, as recent scholarship reveals. The administration resumed the terrorist attacks as soon as the missile crisis subsided.

A standard way to evade the unpleasant topic is to keep to the CIA assassination plots against Castro, ridiculing their absurdity. They did exist, but were a minor footnote to the terrorist war launched by the Kennedy brothers after the failure of their Bay of Pigs invasion, a war that is hard to match in the annals of international terrorism.

There is now much debate about whether Cuba should be removed from the list of states supporting terrorism. It can only bring to mind the words of Tacitus that "crime once exposed had no refuge but in audacity." Except that it is not exposed, thanks to the "treason of the intellectuals."

On taking ofce after the assassination, President Johnson relaxed the terrorism, which however continued through the 1990s. But he was not about to allow Cuba to survive in peace. He explained to Senator Fulbright that though "I'm not getting into any Bay of Pigs deal," he wanted advice about "what we ought to do to pinch their nuts more than we're doing." Commenting, Latin America historian Lars Schoultz observes that "Nut-pinching has been U.S. policy ever since."

Some, to be sure, have felt that such delicate means are not enough, for example, Nixon cabinet member Alexander Haig, who asked the president to "just give me the word and I'll turn that f— island into a parking lot." His eloquence captured vividly the long-standing frustration of US leaders about "That infernal little Cuban republic," Theodore Roosevelt's phrase as he ranted in fury over Cuban unwillingness to accept graciously the US invasion of 1898 to block their liberation from Spain and turn them into a virtual colony. Surely his courageous ride up San Juan Hill had been in a noble cause (overlooked, commonly, is that African-American battalions were largely responsible for conquering the hill).

Cuba historian Louis Pérez writes that the US intervention, hailed at home as a humanitarian intervention to liberate Cuba, achieved its actual objectives: "A Cuban war of liberation was transformed into a U.S. war of conquest," the "Spanish-American war" in imperial nomenclature, designed to obscure the Cuban victory that was quickly aborted by the invasion. The outcome relieved American anxieties about "what was anathema to all North American policymakers since Thomas Jefferson — Cuban independence."

How things have changed in two centuries.

There have been tentative efforts to improve relations in the past 50 years, reviewed in detail by William LeoGrande and Peter Kornbluh in their recent comprehensive study, Back Channel to Cuba. Whether we should feel "proud about ourselves" for the steps that Obama has taken may be debated, but they are "the right thing," even though the crushing embargo remains in place in deance of the entire world (Israel excepted) and tourism is still barred. In his address to the nation announcing the new policy, the president made it clear that in other respects too, the punishment of Cuba for refusing to bend to US will and violence will continue, repeating pretexts that are too ludicrous for comment.

Worthy of attention, however, are the president's words, such as the following:

> "Proudly, the United States has supported democracy and human rights in Cuba through these ve decades. We've done so primarily through policies that aim to isolate the island, preventing the most basic travel and commerce that Americans can enjoy anyplace else. And though this policy has been rooted in the best of intentions, no other nation joins us in imposing these sanctions and it has had little effect beyond providing the Cuban government with a rationale for restrictions on its people … Today, I'm being honest with you. We can never erase the history between us."

One has to admire the stunning audacity of this pronouncement, which again recalls the words of Tacitus. Obama is surely not unaware of the actual history, which includes not only the murderous terrorist war and scandalous economic embargo, but also military occupation of Southeastern Cuba for over a century, including its major port, despite requests by the government since independence to return what was stolen at gunpoint — a policy justied only by the fanatic commitment to block Cuba's economic development. By comparison, Putin's illegal takeover of

Crimea looks almost benign. Dedication to revenge against the impudent Cubans who resist US domination has been so extreme that it has even overruled the wishes of powerful segments of the business community for normalization — pharmaceuticals, agribusiness, energy – an unusual development in US foreign policy. Washington's cruel and vindictive policies have virtually isolated the US in the hemisphere and elicited contempt and ridicule throughout the world. Washington and its acolytes like to pretend that they have been "isolating" Cuba, as Obama intoned, but the record shows clearly that it is the US that is being isolated, probably the primary reason for the partial change of course.

Domestic opinion no doubt is also a factor in Obama's "historic move" — though the public has, irrelevantly, been in favor of normalization for a long time. A CNN poll in 2014 showed that only a quarter of Americans now regard Cuba as a serious threat to the United States, as compared with over two-thirds thirty years earlier, when President Reagan was warning about the grave threat to our lives posed by the nutmeg capital of the world (Grenada) and by the Nicaraguan army, only two days march from Texas. With fears now having somewhat abated, perhaps we can slightly relax our vigilance.

In the extensive commentary on Obama's decision, a leading theme has been that Washington's benign efforts to bring democracy and human rights to suffering Cubans, sullied only by childish CIA shenanigans, have been a failure. Our lofty goals were not achieved, so a reluctant change of course is in order.

Were the policies a failure? That depends on what the goal was. The answer is quite clear in the documentary record. The Cuban threat was the familiar one that runs through Cold War history, with many predecessors. It was spelled out clearly by the incoming Kennedy administration. The primary concern was that Cuba might be a "virus" that would "spread contagion," to borrow Kissinger's terms for the standard theme, referring to Allende's Chile. That was recognized at once.

Intending to focus attention on Latin America, before taking office Kennedy established a Latin American Mission, headed by Arthur Schlesinger, who reported its conclusions to the incoming president. The Mission warned of the susceptibility of Latin Americans to "the Castro idea of taking matters into one's own hands," a serious danger, as Schlesinger later elaborated, when "The distribution of land and other forms of national wealth greatly favors the propertied classes … [and] The poor and underprivileged, stimulated by the example of the Cuban revolution, are now demanding opportunities for a decent living."

Schlesinger was reiterating the laments of Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, who complained to President Eisenhower about the dangers posed by domestic "Communists," who are able "to get control of mass movements," an unfair advantage that we "have no capacity to duplicate." The reason is that "the poor people are the ones they appeal to and they have always wanted to plunder the rich." It is hard to convince backward and ignorant people to follow our principle that the rich should plunder the poor.

Others elaborated on Schlesinger's warnings. In July 1961, the CIA reported that "The extensive inuence of 'Castroism' is not a function of Cuban power … Castro's shadow looms large because social and economic conditions throughout Latin America invite opposition to ruling authority and encourage agitation for radical change," for which Castro's Cuba provides a model. The State Department Policy Planning Council explained further that "the primary danger we face in Castro is…in the impact the very existence of his regime has upon the leftist movement in many Latin American countries… The simple fact is that Castro represents a successful defiance

of the US, a negation of our whole hemispheric policy of almost a century and a half," ever since the Monroe Doctrine declared the US intention to dominate the hemisphere. To put it simply, historian Thomas Paterson observes, "Cuba, as symbol and reality, challenged U.S. hegemony in Latin America."

The way to deal with a virus that might spread contagion is to kill the virus and inoculate potential victims. That sensible policy is just what Washington pursued, and in terms of its primary goals, the policy has been quite successful. Cuba has survived, but without the ability to achieve the feared potential. And the region was "inoculated" with vicious military dictatorships to prevent contagion, beginning with the Kennedy-inspired military coup that established a National Security terror and torture regime in Brazil shortly after Kennedy's assassination, greeted with much enthusiasm in Washington. The Generals had carried out a "democratic rebellion," Ambassador Lincoln Gordon cabled home. The revolution was "a great victory for free world," which prevented a "total loss to West of all South American Republics" and should "create a greatly improved climate for private investments." This democratic revolution was "the single most decisive victory of freedom in the mid-twentieth century," Gordon held, "one of the major turning points in world history" in this period, which removed what Washington saw as a Castro clone.

The plague then spread throughout the continent, culminating in Reagan's terrorist wars in Central America and nally the assassination of six leading Latin American intellectuals, Jesuit priests, by an elite Salvadoran battalion, fresh from renewed training at the JFK Special Warfare School at Fort Bragg, following the orders of the High Command to murder them along with any witnesses, their housekeeper and her daughter. The 25th anniversary of the assassination has just passed, commemorated with the usual silence considered appropriate for our crimes.

Much the same was true of the Vietnam war, also considered a failure and a defeat. Vietnam itself was of no particular concern, but as the documentary record reveals, Washington was concerned that successful independent development there might spread contagion throughout the region, reaching Indonesia, with its rich resources, and perhaps even as far as Japan — the "superdomino" as it was described by Asia historian John Dower — which might accommodate to an independent East Asia, becoming its industrial and technological center, independent of US control, in effect constructing a New Order in Asia. The US was not prepared to lose the Pacic phase of World War II in the early 1950s, so it turned quickly to support for France's war to reconquer its former colony, and then on to the horrors that ensued, sharply escalated when Kennedy took ofce, later by his successors.

Vietnam was virtually destroyed: it would be a model for no one. And the region was protected by installing murderous dictatorships, much as in Latin America in the same years — it is not unnatural that imperial policy should follow similar lines in different parts of the world. The most important case was Indonesia, protected from contagion by the 1965 Suharto coup, a "staggering mass slaughter" as the New York Times described it accurately, while joining in the general euphoria about "a gleam of light in Asia" (liberal columnist James Reston). In retrospect, Kennedy-Johnson National Security advisor McGeorge Bundy recognized that "our effort" in Vietnam was "excessive" after 1965, with Indonesia safely inoculated.

The Vietnam war is described as a failure, an American defeat. In reality it was a partial victory. The US did not achieve its maximal goal of turning Vietnam into the Philippines, but the major concerns were overcome, much as in the case of Cuba. Such outcomes therefore count as defeat, failure, terrible decisions.

The imperial mentality is wondrous to behold.

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