

REGIONAL GEOPOLITICS

The United States and Cuba

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The ultimate goals and basic instruments of U.S. foreign policy vis-à-vis Cuba have not changed in more than 30 years. In my view, that “consistency” has several explanations:

1. The few changes in the Cuban system in the last 30 years.
2. Cuba’s role as an example of the vulnerability of U.S. hegemony, both in Latin America and worldwide.
3. The alternative model that Cuba poses for Third World societies.
4. The role that the right-wing Cuban community plays in domestic U.S. politics.
5. The high domestic cost to any politician who changes U.S. policy toward Cuba and the relatively few benefits that he would accrue from it.¹

For these reasons, in the main, U.S. policy toward Cuba has most frequently consisted of keeping up the pressure on Havana by traditional means: export embargo, international isolation, backing domestic subversion (whether peaceful or armed) and military quarantine. Sometimes, the stratagem has been to step up the pressure, as in the early part of the Reagan administration when the Torricelli and Helms-Burton Acts were passed.

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¹ The pragmatic dynamic of U.S. thinking and institutions is brilliantly dealt with by José Luis Orozco in his book *El Estado pragmático* (Mexico City: UNAM School of Political and Social Sciences, 1997).

At other moments tensions between the two countries have “loosened up.” In 1963, for example, President Kennedy sent several representatives to secretly negotiate an improvement in relations with Fidel Castro. During the Ford administration, Kissinger made secret contact with the Cuban authorities; and, early on, the Carter administration sought a lessening of tensions in bilateral relations. In 1977 the U.S. and Cuba each opened an Interests Section in the other’s capital.

In the last part of Reagan’s second term, the immigration accord suspended in 1985 was renewed and the New York Accord on Southern Africa was negotiated. After the end of the Cold War, the Bush administration declared that the United States would not pursue the overthrow of the Cuban government by military means and, despite a few incidents, bilateral tension did not escalate until the signing of the Torricelli Act in 1992. In the post-Cold War dynamic, the fact that the United States did not increase tensions constitutes a certain “moderation” in its policy.

Under William Clinton, before the passage of the Helms-Burton Act in March 1996, the May 1995 Immigration Agreement was negotiated, putting an end to the crisis caused by the influx of Cuban refugees traveling by rafts to the U.S. and increasing authorized contact with Cuban society.²

² The Track Two policy sought “to erode Cuban consensus from within with the aim of setting up a democracy.” Richard Nuccio, special advisor



Cuban cigars, famous the world over.

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In my view, beyond specific conditions at any one given time, two general factors are present in all cases. First, it is in U.S. interests to solve specific problems in its relations with Cuba, whether they be migratory questions or Cuban troop withdrawal from Africa, just to give two examples.

Secondly, the United States has a greater interest in sustaining a less confrontational policy vis-à-vis Latin America than in pursuing other momentary objectives on the White House's domestic or foreign agenda.

For example, when Kennedy sent his secret emissaries to Havana, his administration was completely committed to improving relations with Latin America through the Alliance for Progress.³ No elections were on the horizon and Kennedy felt strong domestically after his victory over the Soviets in the 1962 Missile Crisis.

President Carter's Cuban policy was part of a package of proposals to better relations with Latin America. Among these proposals were the signing of the Panama Canal Treaty and better relations with Cuba. There were as yet no signs of instability in Central America, and the benefits of a "moderate" policy toward Cuba made it possible to accept the cost of the Cuban presence in Angola.

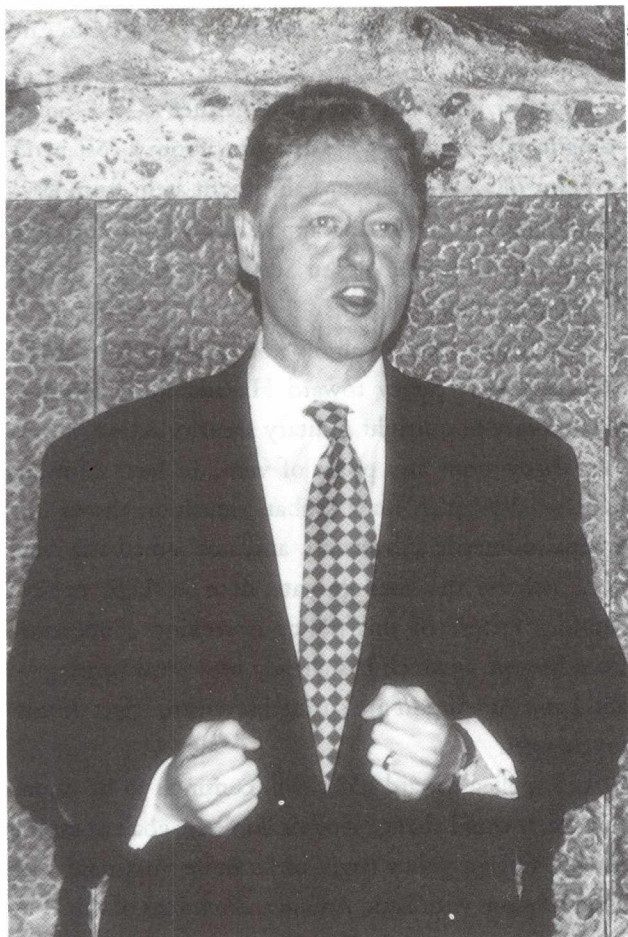
U.S. interest in signing NAFTA with Mexico and establishing a free trade zone in all of the Americas—besides the idea current at the time that the Cuban government would topple of its own weight—were the backdrop for the slight increase in tensions under the Bush administration. Later, in 1992, electoral politics weighed more than relations with Latin America. The Torricelli Act was passed.

Clinton's first period was taken up by preparations for the Summit of the Americas in Miami, where the question of Cuba was barely touched on.

In the midst of the 1996 electoral campaign, U.S. relations with Latin America and Cuba in particular worsened significantly. Mutual criticism increased around

to President Clinton on Cuba, designed this policy. See his paper "La política de la Administración Clinton hacia Cuba" presented at the Guadalajara conference of the Latin American Scholars Association (LASA 97) in April 1997.

³ About this period, see the classic work by Arthur Schlesinger Jr., *Los mil días de Kennedy* (Havana: Edit. Ciencias Sociales, 1970).



President of Mexico's Press Office

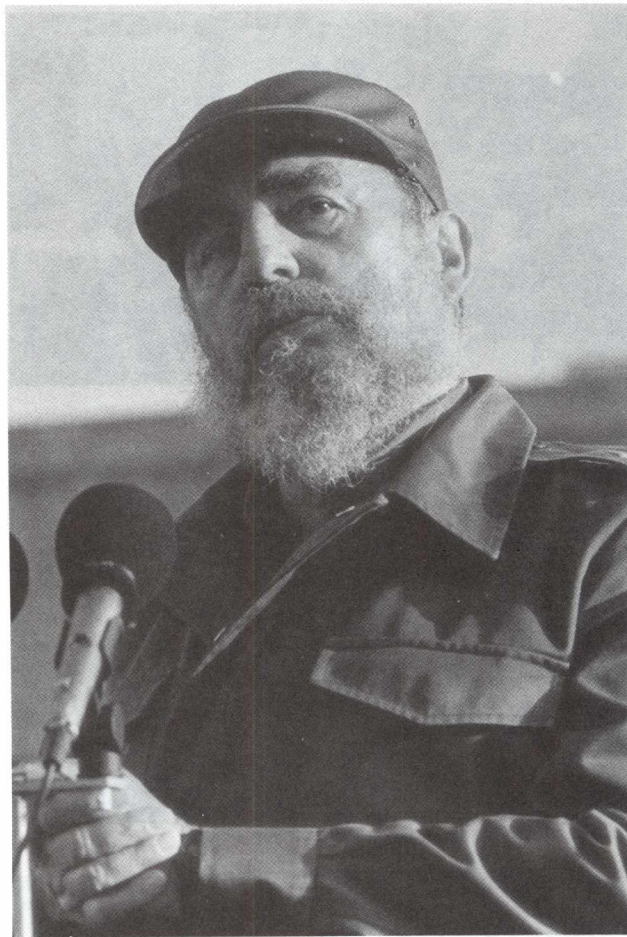
U.S.-Cuban relations have worsened in President Clinton's second term.

questions of protectionism, drug trafficking, migration and finally, the Helms-Burton Act, which toughened the U.S. embargo against Cuba and kindled severe criticisms throughout the region.⁴

At that stage, the United States —particularly the congress— was not concerned with good relations with the area, nor were the costs of Helms-Burton greater in the eyes of the Democrats than the Clinton administration's electoral wins in Florida.

In 1997, however, the panorama has changed. Contradictions between the United States and Latin

⁴ Good analyses of the Helms-Burton Act can be found in Stempfen Licio, "Helms-Burton and the Point of Diminishing Returns," *International Affairs* v.72.4 (1996); Peter Hakin, "To Help Cuba Most, Think Beyond Castro," *Christian Science Monitor* (Boston), 29 June 1995; and Jorge Domínguez, *The Helms and Burton Bills on Cuba: An Early Assessment, Policy Brief* (Washington, D.C.: Interamerican Dialogue, May 1995).



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It seems unlikely that President Castro will ever bow to U.S. pressure.

America have abated and U.S. interest in the area has intensified.⁵ Besides his May 1997 visit to Mexico, Clinton has slated two more trips to Latin America. The idea of reopening the road toward an "Enterprise for the Americas" has begun to be debated again in view of preparations for the March 1998 Santiago de Chile Summit.

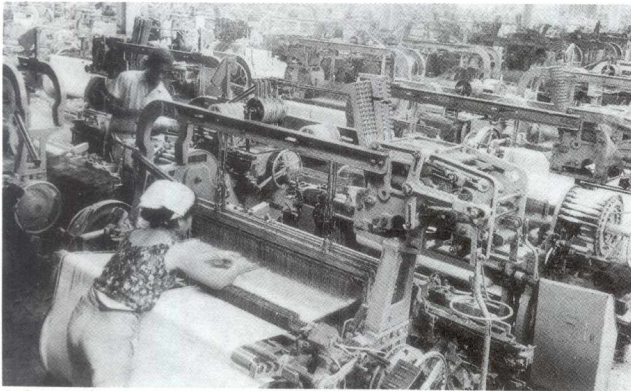
Obviously, relations with Cuba are not going to improve. In addition to the structural factors pointed out at the beginning of this essay, the Helms-Burton Act eliminates any ability the Clinton administration might

⁵ See, for example, Madeleine Albright's initial statements during her Senate confirmation hearing in Jim Cason and David Brooks, "Mayor atención a América Latina, propone Albright," *La Jornada* (Mexico City) 9 January 1997. See also Martin Walker, "Present at the Solution. Madeleine Albright's Ambitious Foreign Policy," *World Policy Journal* (spring 1997).



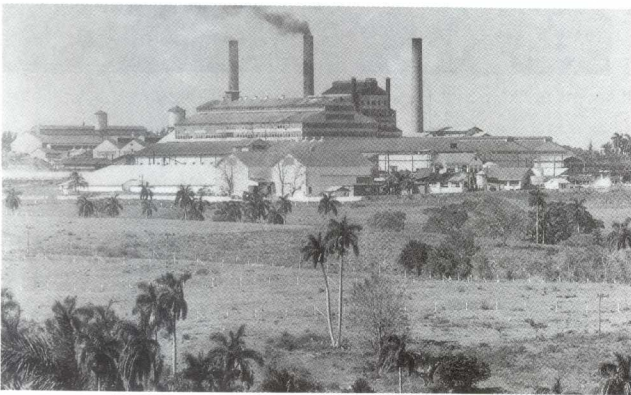
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Cubans demonstrate against foreign intervention.



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Cuba's industry struggles to survive.



Joaquin Vinas

Camilo Cienfuegos Sugar Refinery Plant.



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Seaside walkway in Havana.

have for taking its own initiatives in policy toward Cuba.⁶

However, it would seem that neither is U.S. policy going to take a more aggressive turn. From a cost-benefit point of view, whatever gain might stem from escalating tensions with Cuba apparently would not compensate the costs the United States would have to bear in its hemispheric relations.⁷

In addition, there really is not very much room for escalating U.S. policy toward Havana short of either paramilitary or outright military security action, always very costly from any point of view. In fact, Clinton's January 1997 plan for a Cuban transition shows that gradual domestic subversion, and not armed intervention, will be the predominate note in U.S. policy.⁸ Another feature of this policy is seeking cooperation from Europe—which has already been forthcoming⁹ and Latin America in pressuring Havana to effect domestic changes.

U.S. policy toward Cuba will continue to be unpredictable. It could change if other domestic goals or aspects of U.S. foreign policy begin to be more important than good relations with Latin America. Situations of this kind, then, may come up during the next congressional elections slated for 1998, the year 2000 presidential elections or if the idea prevailed that escalating tensions could thwart Cuba's economic recovery. A brusque change in U.S. policy toward Cuba could also occur in the face of another incident like the February 1996 airplane affair or if the administration came to the conclusion that the weakening of the Cuban government made "decisive" U.S. action "acceptable." ❧

⁶ My analysis of the impact this law had on Cuba and U.S. policy is laid out in an interview Miguel Angel Granados Chapa did with me, "La Ley Helms-Burton, otra vuelta de tuerca," published in *Mira* (Mexico City), 26 June 1996.

⁷ It is interesting to note that in its 1997 annual report, the influential magazine *Diálogos Interamericanos* situates Cuba and drug trafficking as the most conflictive factors in U.S.-Latin American relations in 1996 due to unilateral U.S. policy.

⁸ For a description of the plan, see Stanley Meisler, "Clinton Pledges Aid for Post-Castro Cuba," *Los Angeles Times*, 29 January 1997.

⁹ A good discussion of this question can be found in Jay Branegan, "Trading Truce," *Time*, 28 April 1997.