

Cuba as an Obsessive Compulsive Disorder

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As a nation we seemed unable to maintain a sense of perspective about Cuba.

—Cyrus R. Vance, *Hard Choices: Critical Years in America's Foreign Policy* (New York, 1983)

The rationale of the Cuba policy no longer commands credibility. No longer can the policy be assumed to derive its *raison d'être* from the realm of the plausible. Disinterested observers—which is to say, much of the world—are most assuredly correct to suspect that Cuba is a peculiar American obsession. Eleven presidential administrations, including Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives, have failed to resolve what must be considered a policy anomaly of singular distinction: more than 50 years of political isolation and economic sanctions, longer than the U.S. refusal to recognize the Soviet Union, longer than the hiatus of normal relations with China, longer than it took to reconcile with post-war Vietnam. Cuba has been under U. S. sanctions for almost half its national existence as an independent republic.

U.S. relations with Cuba—or perhaps more correctly, the U.S. relationship with Cuba—is a complex matter. The subject of Cuba has rarely been a topic of reasoned disquisition. It defies facile explanation, and certainly cannot be understood solely—or even principally—within the logic of the policy calculus that otherwise serves to inform U.S. foreign relations, mostly because it is not logical.

This is not to suggest that the policy of sanctions is without political constituencies, of course. Considerations of domestic politics as a determinant of foreign policy are not without precedent. Cuba is no exception. Influential Cuban-American interest groups have acted with single-minded advocacy in behalf of the embargo. Lobbyists and political action committees, including the Free Cuba Political Action Committee, the U.S.-Cuba Democracy Political Action

Committee, and the Cuba Libre Political Action Committee, among others, have channeled substantial financial resources into the electoral system in behalf of hard-line policies against Cuba. That the state of Florida looms large in national elections, moreover, has further enhanced the political importance of the Cuban-American vote, long presumed to favor continuation of sanctions. Candidates for national office, whether in primary contests or general elections, tread lightly on the subject of Cuba while campaigning in Florida, persuaded that the safe course is the hard-line course so well-trodden by almost every presidential candidate to have visited the Sunshine State for the last 50 years.

But the role of political action committees and the bid for the Cuban-American vote are not themselves sufficient explanations for the endurance of the embargo. On the contrary, it is certainly an arguable proposition that political action committees are themselves the consequence of the policy, not the cause. In fact, the matter of Cuba is far more complicated than the politics of domestic interest groups.

To reflect on the Cuba policy of the United States is to confront a profoundly counter-intuitive state of affairs, characterized by the inability and/or the unwillingness of policymakers to bestir themselves to reexamine the efficacy of a 50-year-old policy whose most remarkable feature—almost everyone agrees—has been failure. Candidate Barack Obama is only the most recent aspirant to national office whose candidacy was served by calling attention to the failed Cuba policy advocated by his rival—the very Cuba policy of the previous ten presidential administrations. “There’s nothing more naive,” affirmed Obama in May 2008, “than continuing a policy that has failed for decades.”

In fact, the sources of this policy anomaly must be sought elsewhere, for U.S. attitudes toward Cuba are driven by an interior logic with antecedents deep in the nineteenth century. It is condition that has assumed fully the form of a syndrome, one that emerged out the experience of national formation, shaped at a time during which Americans were engaged in fashioning the geo-political cosmologies of their place in the world at large. It is, in sum, a condition possessed

of a proper history, an understanding of which is relevant to the current U.S.-Cuban problematic.

There has been something profoundly intimate about the U.S.-Cuba relationship, a complexity that makes for a dense interior history of 200 years of interaction between both countries. History in this instance has passed into the public domain mostly as memory: knowledge of the past shaped around the myths that inform the founding narratives of each country, thereupon to serve as one of the principal means through which Americans and Cubans approximated an understanding of each other, a way too with which both countries claimed righteous purpose in their dealings with one another.

The idea of Cuba insinuated deeply itself into the collective consciousness of the United States, and thereupon ceased to exist as outer objective reality, a condition that served the efface the presence of a people in Cuba possessed of a separate history and endowed with aspirations of a proper destiny. The very existence of Cuba has been imagined in function of U.S. needs. Cuba developed in the United States as an interior measure of well-being, a means to validate the natural order of things and fulfill a promised destiny.

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To enter the strategic logic by which Americans envisioned the imperatives of national interest in the nineteenth century is to understand readily how the United States fixated its attention on Cuba. The acquisition of Louisiana (1803) and Florida (1819) projected the United States onto the Gulf of Mexico. Once at the water's edge, the national gaze fixed on the southern horizon, whereupon Cuba came into view—"almost in sight of our shores," John Quincy Adams exaggerated to make the point. Lying astride the principal sea lanes of the middle latitudes of the Western Hemisphere, commanding on one side entrance to the Gulf and outlet of the vast Mississippi Valley and on the other fronting the Caribbean Sea, the island assumed strategic and commercial significance of looming proportions.

To claim Cuba as "almost in sight" was to allude to the circumstance of proximity, of

course. But proximity in this instance portended peril, and the presence of peril “almost in sight” was not condition to which the Americans could reconcile themselves. Cuba mattered precisely because the proximity of its location. That it was in possession of a declining colonial power made the status of its future sovereignty a matter of an abiding preoccupation. It was impossible to lose sight of Cuba, for much seemed to depend on a careful watch on all matters—domestic and foreign—pertaining to the island. The United States could not risk distraction or interruption of the gaze. The United States, U.S. Minister to Spain Romulus Saunders informed Spanish authorities in 1848, had a “very deep interest . . . in everything connected with the present condition and future prospects of Cuba.”

So it was that Cuba became an American fixation. “Look, sir, to the very case of Cuba—the most delicate, and vastly the most important point in all our foreign relations,” Daniel Webster exhorted in 1826. “[It] is placed in the mouth of the Mississippi. Its occupation by a strong maritime power would be felt, in the first moment of hostility, as far up as the Mississippi and Missouri, as our population extends. It is the commanding point of the Gulf of Mexico. See, too, how it lies in the very line of our coast-wise traffic; interposed in the very highway between New York and New Orleans.”

Cuba mattered deeply to a national sense of security and collective well-being. “The instincts of the American people,” Senator J.P. Benjamin insisted, “have already taught them that we shall ever be insecure against hostile attack until this important geographical and military position is place under our protection and control.” Secretary of State James Buchanan was unequivocal on the matter of Cuba: “In the possession of . . . any strong naval power, it might prove ruinous to our domestic and foreign commerce, and even endanger the union of the States. The highest and first duty of every independent nation is to provide for its own safety; and, acting upon this principle, we should be compelled to resist the acquisition of Cuba by any powerful maritime State, with all the means which Providence has placed at our command.” On the other hand, Buchanan predicted, Cuba annexed to the United States would relieve the nation “from the

apprehensions which we can never cease to feel for our own safety and the security of our commerce, whilst it shall remain in its present condition.” The Ostend Manifesto in 1854 articulated the national consensus unequivocally: “Cuba [in its present condition] has thus become to us an unceasing danger, and a permanent cause of anxiety and alarm.” And to the larger moral: “The Union can never enjoy repose, nor possess reliable security, as long as Cuba is not embraced within its boundaries.”

Whether or not these were rational apprehensions matters less than the fact that they served to fix the importance of Cuba as a matter vital to the national interest. The United States could not contemplate the future national well-being without the presumption of possession of Cuba. The supposition of secure nationhood inscribed itself as a condition dependent upon possession of Cuba and assumed fully the form of received wisdom, and subsequently transmuted into the basis of an enduring policy consensus. “An object of transcendent importance to the political and commercial interests of our Union,” John Adams insisted, and more: “It is scarcely possible to resist the conviction that the annexation of Cuba to our federal republic will be indispensable to the continuance and integrity of the Union itself.”

The proposition of Cuba as essential to the national interest developed into an article of faith, one of those political truths passed and received as something of a policy legacy by successive presidential administrations all through the nineteenth century. “Cuba has long been one of the ‘cards’ of American party politics,” the *Nation* correctly observed in 1898—and a prophetic augury of a politics one century later: “For over fifty years one party or another has proposed to help itself by the deliverance of Cuba.” Citizens who pondered affairs of state, as elected leaders and appointed policymakers; as newspaper editors and magazine publishers; journalists, essayists, and writer; and the expanding sectors of the informed electorate: almost all who contemplated the future well-being of the nation were fully persuaded that possession of Cuba was a matter of national necessity. The Senate Committee on Foreign Relations summarized the prevailing national consensus of the nineteenth century: “The ultimate

acquisition of Cuba may be considered the fixed purpose of the United States, a purpose resulting from political and geographical necessities which have been recognized by all parties and all administrations, and in regard to which the popular voice has been expressed with a unanimity unsurpassed on any question of national policy that has heretofore engaged the public mind All agree that the end is not only desirable but inevitable. The only difference of opinion is to the time, mode, and conditions of obtaining it.”

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Consciousness of Cuba developed as facet of the very process by which Americans arrived to collective self-awareness, during the time of national formation as Americans began to imagine themselves as a nationality and a people with common—that is, “national”—interests. Cuba loomed large in American meditations on national security, and insinuated itself deeply into those realms from which a people arrive to an understanding of the circumstances upon which their collective well-being depend. If Cuba seemed to have no proper destiny other than as an extension of American interests it was because the United States appeared to have no secure future without possession of Cuba. The fate of Cuba, insisted Congressman Milton Latham, due to “its proximity to our shores,” was of “vast importance to the peace and security of this country,” and to the point: “We cannot allow it to pass from its present proprietors into other hands.” John Calhoun urged “resort to the hazard of war with all its calamities” to prevent Cuba from passing “into any other hands but ours,” and added: “This, not from a feeling of ambitious, not from a desire for the extension of dominion, but because that island is indispensable to the safety of the United States.” Secretary of State John Clayton reiterated the U.S. position at mid-century: “Our government [is] resolutely determined that the Island of Cuba should never be in the possession of any other power than that of Spain or the United States.” The “whole power of the United States would be employed to prevent . . . Cuba from passing into other hands”—Clayton warned—and continued: “This Government is resolutely determined that the

Island of Cuba shall never be ceded by Spain to any other power than the United States.”

Clayton was explicit: “The news of the cession of Cuba to any foreign power would, in the United States, be the instant signal for war.”

Cuba had become one of the most important places in the world. The solvency of the Union, many believed—perhaps its very survival, others feared—depended on Cuba. “I know of no portion of the earth that is now so important to the United States of America as the Island of Cuba is,” Senator Robert Toombs pronounced at mid-century. Congressman James Clay agreed: “There is no subject of our foreign relations whatever at all to compare with [the acquisition of Cuba] No one has for a moment doubted the vital necessity to us of the acquisition of Cuba.”

To contemplate possession of Cuba was to envisage national greatness and a future of progress and prosperity. “Give us Cuba . . . ,” Senator Robert Toombs exulted at mid-century, “and we shall command all the . . . wants of the human race; we shall control their commerce in everything.” With Cuba, Toombs predicted, “we can make first the Gulf of Mexico, and then the Caribbean sea, a *mare clausum*,” whereupon the day would not be too distant “when no flag shall float there except by permission of the United States of America.” Possession of Cuba, predicted the weekly *DeBow’s Review*, promised “control over the commerce and wealth of this new world,” adding: “And with that commerce we can control the power of the world. Give us [Cuba], and we can make the public opinion of the world.” It was perhaps only a matter of time that Americans persuaded themselves too that the well-being of the entire world depended on the U.S. possession of Cuba. “[T]he future interests, not only of this country but of civilization and of human progress,” proclaimed Senator James Bayard at mid-century, “are deeply involved in the acquisition of Cuba by the United States.”

To understand the fixation on Cuba is to appreciate the psychology that served to inform the assumptions upon which Americans contemplated Cuba. If Cuba was to have made the United States stronger, more secure—indeed, in Adam’s words, Cuba as “indispensable to the

continuance and integrity of the Union itself”—the logic of national interests rendered the need to control Cuba as obligatory as it was obvious. A sense of national completion seemed to depend on Cuba, without which the American Union seemed unfinished, perhaps incomplete, maybe even slightly vulnerable. “We must have Cuba. We can’t do without Cuba,” James Buchanan exhorted.

But preoccupation with Cuba implied more than attention to the requirements of national interests. Cuba reached deeply into the very narratives through which Americans explained to themselves the rationale of their needs and the virtue of their purpose. The island became deeply implicated in the moral systems around which Americans fashioned their founding myths and presumption of exceptionalism, which meant too that the acquisition of Cuba was understood to respond to a larger logic, not merely as a matter of discharge of a pragmatic foreign policy but in fulfillment of Providential purpose.

Therein originates the anomaly that was to become the matter of Cuba. Narratives given to plausible formulation of national interests were themselves cultural artifacts and moral imperatives, fashioned under specific historical circumstances and articulated within the prevailing cosmologies of the times. It could hardly have been otherwise, of course. The narratives served as the moral framework through which Americans arrived to an understanding of their relationship to Cuba. The idea of Cuba formed during a time of transcendentalist susceptibilities, where reason yielded to intuition, a time when the certainty of destiny precluded the need for cognitive plausibility. The claim to Cuba obtained discursive ascendancy as metaphysical musings, full-blown narratives of Providential purpose and Divine intent: all in all, moral warrant inscribed within the mythical idyll through which Americans assembled the terms of collective self-representation.

These musings drew upon different epistemologies, to be sure, but they obtained currency within shared belief systems given to divination and revelation, a belief in destiny as a function of Providential intent and possessed of intelligible design to be intuited and interpreted as

auguries of a divinely-ordained future. Access to knowledge of reality—or more specifically, of *realpolitik*—assumed the form of metaphysical inference and obtained credence as a matter of faith, and faith drew its sustenance by way of national hubris. There was a teleology at work here, of course, a people persuaded that geography—in this instance physical proximity—signified a mode of divination. “To cast the eye upon the map was sufficient to predict [Cuba’s] destiny,” pronounced the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations at mid-century. Proximity did indeed seem to suggest destiny, and about destiny there was unanimity: it was manifest. “Judging from . . . the geographical position of Cuba,” mused poet Walt Whitman in 1858, “there can be little doubt that. . . it will gradually be absorbed into the Union It is impossible to say what the future will bring forth, but ‘manifest destiny’ certainly points to the speedy annexation of Cuba by the United States.”

There was no small amount of self-deception in these formulations, of course: a people fully in the thrall of myths of their own making and into which they incorporated the need to acquire Cuba as a means of national fulfillment. But national fulfillment in this instance was rendered principally as an expression of Providential intent: Americans in discharge of a destiny as a matter of Divine design. “It is because Cuba has been placed by the Maker of all things in such a position on earth’s surface as to make its possession by the United States a geographical and political necessity,” insisted Congressman James Clay at mid-century; “we must have Cuba, from a necessity which the Maker of the world has created.” Geography was as a matter of Providential intent, insisted Congressman Townsend Scudder, for Cuba was a “territory that God and nature intended to be a part of the United States.” The acquisition of Cuba signified the enactment of the natural order of things. “The natural connexion of Cuba is with the United States,” insisted Secretary of State William Marcy. Secretary of State Edward Everett agreed. “Cuba lies at our doors,” Everett insisted, evidence that its acquisition by the United States was “in the natural order of things.”

Possession of Cuba was anticipated as the result of the workings of Providential purpose,

less an outcome of human agency than the outcome of Divine intent as the natural order of things. Cuba was an “unnatural” possession of Spain, John Adams insisted, a relationship that would inevitably be remedied by the laws of Nature. “There are laws of political, as well as of physical gravitation,” Adams posited in 1823; “and if an apple, severed by the tempest from its native tree, cannot choose but fall to the ground, Cuba, forcibly disjoined from its own unnatural connexion with Spain, and incapable of self-support, can gravitate only towards the North American Union, which, by the same law of nature, cannot cast her off from its bosom.”

The proposition of proximity was itself both premise and product of subjective vision: geography invested with the capacity to confirm Providential purport. Cuba was a “natural appendage” of the United States, Secretary of State John Quincy Adams insisted, whereupon he concluded that the “interests” of Cuba and the United States were “formed by nature.” Congressman Miles Taylor insisted that Cuba “lies contiguous to our territory,” and to the point: “The geographical position of the island is such that it seems to be marked out by nature to become, at no distant day, part of the Union.” For John Thrasher the acquisition of Cuba involved “the question whether we shall follow the paths of development which nature has provided for us.”

It required a short leap of faith to propound that Cuba was in fact part of the United States, and thereupon efface altogether the notion of any distance between Cuba and the United States. Cuba was “by nature . . . connected with the United States,” Hamilton Fish pronounced. The “island forms properly an appendage of the Floridas,” U.S. minister to Spain Alexander Everett argued, and Secretary of State Edward Everett pronounced Cuba a “natural appendage to our Continent.” Senator Shelby Moore Cullom proclaimed Cuba to be “the natural property of the United States, and we will have her some day.” “Cuba is a mere extension of our Atlantic coast line,” Senator Albert Beveridge insisted, “a geographical annex of Florida” and “a prolongation of the Florida Peninsula,” adding that Cuba was “geographically part of Florida. Her position in the Gulf makes her American.” Congressman William Sulzer was emphatic:

“Cuba lies at our very door and is a natural part of our geographical domain.” Senator William Seward insisted that Cuba was literally part of the United States by virtue of its geological origins. “Every rock and every grain of sand in the island were drifted and washed out from American soil by the floods of the Mississippi, and other estuaries of the Gulf of Mexico,” Lincoln’s future Secretary of State insisted. “The island has seemed to me . . . to gravitate back again to the parent continent from which it sprang.”

Adam’s metaphor of gravity—“political gravitation”—was the analogy of choice, rendered as another mode by which Divine design would work its intended purpose. “The natural, God’s law,” U.S. Consul General in Havana Ramon Williams insisted, “forces [Cuba] to gravitate to the United States.” With regard to the “final destiny of Cuba,” predicted *Boston Globe* editor Maturin Ballou in 1888, the course of “natural laws” was as certain “in their operation as are those of gravitation,” adding: “[Cuba’s] home is naturally within our own constellation of stars.” Cuba “belonged naturally in the orbit of the Northern Republic,” writer Isaac Ford insisted in 1893, “and sooner or later will be drawn into its place by the law of economic gravitation Cuba belongs in the Union. Nature intended it to be there.”

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1898 was the year of denouement, the point at which the history of both countries wrapped around one another in structural form: Cuba to be bound to the United States, President William McKinley predicted in 1899, by “ties of singular intimacy.” The much-anticipated succession of U.S. sovereignty over Cuba was realized as destiny foretold, an outcome long in the making, understood as a matter of the natural order of things and achieved as an act of national completion. Americans entered the war against Spain in the swoon of history, as if in discharge of prophetic purpose and fulfillment of the natural order of things: the interests of the nation properly—and finally—aligned with the plan of Nature. History had come to pass as it was meant to, with the “territory that God and nature intended to be a part of the United States,” in

Congressman Scudder's words, secure under U.S. control.

The United States went to war—as it always warned it would—to prevent the transfer of Cuba to a third party, in this case, to prevent the transfer of Cuba to Cubans. The Americans inserted themselves between weakened Spaniards and weary Cubans, to complete the defeat of the former and obstruct the victory of the latter, and thereupon claim Cuba as conquered territory. “The foundation of our authority in Cuba,” proclaimed President McKinley in December 1898, “is the law of belligerent right over conquered territory.” Years into his retirement, McKinley's Secretary of War Elihu Root was categorical: “We acquired title to Cuba by conquest.” By the terms of the Treaty of Paris (1898), Spain transferred sovereignty of Cuba to the United States. At long last, Cuba was in the possession of the United States. No one doubted that possession—in one form or other—was intended to be permanent.

The prerogative of U.S. sovereignty over Cuba was subsequently inscribed into the institutional framework of the Cuban republic by way of the Platt Amendment, incorporated into the Cuban Constitution of 1901 and subsequently ratified as the Permanent Treaty (1903). That is, the Cuban republic denied essential properties of sovereignty as a condition of its creation: denied authority to enter into “any treaty or other compact with any foreign power or powers,” forced to cede national territory to accommodate a U.S. naval station, and obliged to concede to the United States “the right to intervene” for the “maintenance of a government adequate for the protection of life, property, and individual liberty.”

The United States thus retained claim to the sovereignty it had wrested from Spain in 1898. It could have hardly been otherwise, of course, for the national interest could not contemplate renunciation of control over a territory long considered “indispensable to the continuance and integrity of the Union itself.” Certainly this was the purport of a *Chicago Tribune* editorial in 1906: “The possession of Cuba has been the dream of American statesmen ever since our government was organized. Cuba is at our doors . . . a few hours distant from our southern coast. Our title to it is as good as that of anybody. We have as righteous a claim to it as

the people who are now occupying it.”

But it was more complicated still. The national narrative that subsequently privileged the protagonists of war as Spain and the United States—the “Spanish-American War”—served also to advance the proposition of Cuban independence from Spain achieved by the efforts of the Americans, through their sacrifices, at the expense of their lives, and through the expenditure of their treasure. The Cubans had contributed little—or nothing. “American arms,” Congressman T. J. Selby insisted—and most Americans agreed—“accomplished in a few weeks what Cuba had failed to do in a century and what Cuba never could have done in a century to come.” This was the United States in the self-proclaimed role of benefactor—a progenitor of sorts—having delivered Cuba from colonial tutelage and guiding the island into nationhood, properly entitled to a claim of enduring Cuban gratitude: one people beholden to another for the sacrifices made in their behalf. Cuba thus “belonged” to the United States in some larger existential sense, Cubans indebted to the Americans who had sacrificed so much to make their very national existence possible.

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The political forces that crashed upon one another in fateful climax after 1959 were set in motion long before the triumph of the Cuban revolution. The character of the estrangement that followed had to do with all the history that had preceded it. The United States responded in defense of historic national interests, made all the more urgent in an environment of Cold War tensions. But it is also true that U.S. reactions were conditioned within historically-determined assumptions, where conventions associated with the prerogative of power had assumed the condition of “normal” as a matter of ideological conviction and a function of psychological contingencies.

Confrontation between the United States and Cuba in 1959 escalated rapidly in a familiar sequence of events. The Americans reacted to Cuban nationalization of U.S. property with

economic retaliation, whereupon the Cubans countered with more expropriations, and to which the United States responded with new reprisals, until January 1961 when the United States and Cuba severed diplomatic relations.

But the worse was yet to come. The alarm with which the United States responded to Cuban domestic policies was eclipsed by the abhorrence with which it reacted to Cuban foreign policy. The presence of the Soviet Union in Cuba rekindled the long brooding fears of the nineteenth century, of an adversary establishing itself “almost within sight of our shores.” The missiles of October 1962, Soviet submarines in Cienfuegos, and Soviet signals intelligence center in Lourdes: all palpable and menacing confirmation of an expanding Soviet presence. In a security culture so very much shaped by paradigms of “balance of power” and “spheres of influence,” the presence of the Soviet Union at a distance of 90 miles wrought havoc on some of the most fundamental premises of U.S. strategic thinking—“imperiling the very survival of the United States,” despaired Ambassador Spruille Braden. Indeed, the rhetoric became dense with apocalyptic forebodings. “A problem involving our survival,” feared Senator Kenneth Keating. Congressman Mendel Rivers warned of “the agonies of Communist cancer, which most assuredly will engulf the Nation if Cuba is allowed to fester as the cell from which this cancerous growth will spread.” Central Intelligence Agency Director John McCone was somber: “In my opinion, Cuba was the key to all of Latin America; if Cuba succeeds, we can expect most of Latin America to fall.” Cuba had developed into the very peril to which 150 years of U.S. policy had been dedicated to preventing.

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It was difficult at the time—and thereafter—to arrange into coherent narrative form the complexity of U.S. reactions to developments in Cuba. Americans were aghast. How utterly implausible: of all places, Cuba News broadcaster Walter Cronkite aptly conveyed something of the cognitive dissonance that jolted the breezy assumptions that informed U.S.

knowledge of Cuba: “The rise of Fidel Castro . . . was a terrible shock to the American people. This brought communism practically to our shores We kind of considered [Cuba] part of the United States—of course, it is part of America—we considered it part of the United States practically, just a wonderful little country over there that was of no danger to anybody The country was a little colony. Suddenly, revolution, and it became communist and allied with the Soviet Union An ally of the Soviet Union, right off of our shores—it was frightening.” All in all, profoundly unsettling developments as a vague amorphous anxiety settled over the United States. Cuba seemed always to have served as a measure of a preordained natural order. Suddenly everything was out of order. Former diplomat Wayne Smith was most assuredly correct to suggest that most Americans were overcome with “a sense . . . of the rightful order of things violated.” Congressman Mendel Rivers alluded to a simpler policy dictum: “Cuba is no foreign land to us. She is as important to us as any of our own States: she forms part of our hegemony. God, through His divine workings, created our geographical proximity.”

With seeming flagrant impunity, the Cuban leadership had compromised the national security of the United States and exposed the homeland to a vulnerability on an unparalleled scale. The presence of communists in Cuba was as unimaginable and as it was inadmissible. But there they were, and worse yet: the United States seemed unable to make them go away.

Americans could hardly contain their indignation. “Our national honor is vilified,” decried Senator Gordon Allott; “an insult to American prestige, a challenge to American dignity,” Congressman Mendel Rivers protested, which was similar to New York Senator Kenneth Keating’s denunciation of Cuba as “an affront . . . to the dignity of the United States.” The existence of the Castro government, Senator Barry Goldwater insisted, was “a disgrace and an affront which diminishes the respect with which we are held by the rest of the world.”

Developments in Cuba plunged the United States into a state of confoundment and confusion, which in turn produced angst and anxiety. Assistant Secretary of State John Hill described in 1959 “puzzlement” among senior officials at the Department of Defense who “do not

know either that we have a definite policy or what its nature is.” The Castro government, brooded Henry Ramsey of the State Department Policy Planning Staff the following year, “has reduced us to a state of semi-paralysis.”

The Cuban defeat of the U.S.-sponsored Bay of Pigs invasion made everything worse, adding insult to injury and transforming what had been an embarrassment into humiliation. U.S. policy thereupon acquired one of its enduring attributes: punitive purpose. Only days after the Bay of Pigs, the National Security Council resolved to continue “all kinds of harassment to punish Castro for the humiliation he has brought to our door.” Many of the people party to and participant in the post-Bay of Pigs deliberations remembered vividly the mood of the Kennedy White House. “Emotional, almost savage,” Under-Secretary Chester Bowles later wrote. “The President and the U.S. Government had been humiliated,” Bowles recalled and something had to be done “to punish Castro for defeating our abortive invasion attempt.” Joseph Califano would later describe a “vengeful” ambience and presidential advisor Richard Goodwin remembered President Kennedy being “furious at Castro, who had humiliated his fledgling administration.” Former Deputy Under-Secretary of State U. Alexis Johnson remembered Kennedy as being “greatly provoked” by Fidel Castro, whom he considered “an affront and wanted him out.” The presence of the Castro government “offended” the President, Johnson recalled, adding that Kennedy “felt personally humiliated by a communist Cuba, and toppling Castro became something of an obsession for him.” CIA Deputy Director Bissell later wrote of “the Kennedy administration’s obsession with Cuba,” adding: “From their perspective, Castro won the first round at the Bay of Pigs. He had defeated the Kennedy team: they were bitter and they could not tolerate his getting away with it. The president and his brother were ready to avenge their personal embarrassment by overthrowing their enemy at any cost.” Something of a “paranoid folly,” Senator Gary Hart later wrote, “an almost endless obsession.” Former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara was succinct: “We were hysterical about Castro at the time of the Bay of Pigs and thereafter.”

American indignation was further fueled by a distinctive emotional wrath, feelings of being compromised and made vulnerable as if an act of betrayal. Ire assumed peculiarly personal overtones. Popular memory of 1898 had developed into something of a proprietary sentimentality toward Cuba. To the claim to a relationship with Cuba as a matter of Providential purpose had been added something of a claim of *loco parentis* over the republic that the United States brought into being. Americans were fond of recalling sacrifice and selfless purpose in behalf of Cuba, remembering with no small amount of self-praise the part they had played in delivering Cuba from Spanish colonialism. That Cubans, for whom Americans understood themselves to have expended life and treasure to liberate, turned against the United States and aligned themselves with the Soviet Union assumed fully the proportions of treachery and betrayal, a despicable act of ingratitude. The bonds of “singular intimacy” had been dissolved, and the bitterness that followed was not dissimilar to the animus that often accompanies the dissolution of ties of intimacy.

The acrimony was palpable. “We who in living memory rescued the island from medieval bondage,” protested Senator Karl Mundt; “we who have given order, vitality, technical wisdom and wealth are now being damned for our civilizing and cooperative virtues!” Mundt described the American people as “hurt and chagrined,” and denounced Cubans for having desecrated the memory of Americans who had sacrificed their lives to liberate the island. Mundt called upon Fidel Castro to show “respect for the memory of the American fighting men who died on San Juan Hill, in Cuban jungles, in the war to give independence to his country.” With the “long background of historic relations with Cuba,” Congressman Mendel Rivers decried, “will . . . we forget our obligations toward the Cuban people whom we helped to liberate?” Rivers denounced “the bearded pipsqueak of the Antilles” who “seized American property in a country that was conceived by America, delivered by America, nurtured by America, educated by America and made a self-governing nation by America,” and warned: “When ingratitude on the part of a nation reaches the point that it has in Cuba, it is time for American wrath to display itself in no uncertain terms.” Introduced into the *Congressional Record* of the 106th Congress in June 1960 and a

reflection of the national mood was a denunciation by Pennsylvania Supreme Court Justice Michael Musmanno: “Cuba owes her existence as an independent nation to the United States. Americans sailors and soldiers gave their blood and their lives to liberate Cuba from Spain We withdraw our soldiers and continued to send American educators, architects, doctors and dollars to build up that country. And as a matter of recompense we now look upon the spectacle of the bewhiskered vulgarian who is at present dictating Cuba to her ruin practically spitting on our flag every day We will hold them accountable for ths misdeeds, their insults, and their ingratitude.”

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U.S. policy toward Cuba assumed form under specific historical conditions, under circumstances of heightened Cold War alarm, in a highly politicized environment. The policy response was designed to arrest and reverse Soviet encroachment and punish Cuba for aiding and abetting Soviet expansion. Long after the former ceased to matter, the disposition to the latter persisted. The United States seemed to bear the Soviets no enduring animus for the attempt to install missiles in Cuba. The Cubans, on the other hand, would not be forgiven.

The Cuba policy would long retain traces of the shock and trauma of the circumstances of its origins, as a matter of umbrage and grudge, of emotional release and visceral impulses. “Cuba’s move toward communism,” Secretary of State Dean Rusk later wrote, “had been a deep shock to the American people” and produced “a devastating psychological impact on the American people.” Ambassador Philip Bonsal characterized Americans having “experienced a sense of injury, irritation, and alarm” and Walter Rostow acknowledged that Cuba had produced “a visceral reaction in the government.” Writer Thomas Freeman alluded to what he characterized as a “psychic damage” caused by the “establishment of a hostile government close to [U.S.] shores” and Theodore Draper wrote of “the hysterical approach to the Cuban problem.”

Cuba had become personal. Journalist Daniel James was most assuredly correct to discern

as early as 1961 that Cuba had produced “an anguish that was almost personal.” More than 30 years later, the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College commented on the persistence of the personal: “There is a personal quality to this three-and-a-half decade conflict that has rarely been noted, but which nevertheless remains very much at the heart of the relationship.”

The personal had indeed become political. Policy animus focused on the Cuban leadership, and especially Fidel Castro. Fidel Castro developed into an American obsession. He seemed to personify evil, transformed simultaneously into an anathema and phantasma, a wicked man with whom honorable men could not treat. Americans seemed unable to contemplate the person of Fidel Castro rationally. “In the State Department,” David Lilienthal confided to his diary in January 1962, “I find there is a professional reluctance to mention Castro by name; curious psychological quirk, that.” Chester Bowles remembered the early 1960s as a time when the United States was “running the danger of becoming so obsessed with Castro that it was increasingly difficult for us to think rationally of the area as a whole.” Richard Nixon seemed haunted by Cuba and Fidel Castro. “Cuba was a neuralgic problem for Nixon,” Henry Kissinger recalled years later, observing that Cuba “struck a raw nerve in Nixon,” for “too much of his political life had been tied up with taking a tough stance on this issue,” and further: “Sooner or later he would strike back, and he would then not rest until he had accomplished his objective.” On the matter of Fidel Castro, Nixon was adamant. “There’ll be no change toward that bastard while I’m President,” he vowed to an aide. Former Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger recalled a cabinet meeting to discuss Cuba, “the principal target of [Alexander Haig’s] emotion” and about which he spoke with “passionate intensity,” insisting that “it was quite clear we would have to invade Cuba and, one way or another, put an end to the Castro regime.” The Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College cautioned in 1993 against the “innate emotional appeal” sustaining U.S. policy, adding: “To many, Castro is not merely an adversary, but an enemy—an embodiment of evil who must be punished for his defiance of the United States as well

as for other reprehensible deeds. In this sense, U.S. policy has sought more than a simple solution or containment of Cuba. There is a desire to hurt the enemy that is mirrored in the malevolence that Castro has exhibited towards us. If Fidel suffers from a ‘nemesis complex,’ so must assuredly do we.” *New York Times* foreign affairs editor Thomas Friedman was correct to suggest in 1999 that the U.S. position on Cuba was “not really a policy. It’s an *attitude*—a blind hunger for revenge against Mr. Castro.”

These were frustrations that readily served to introduce emotional undercurrents into policy formulation. Brazilian Ambassador Roberto de Oliveira Campos recalled dealing with American diplomats on the subject of Cuba early in the 1960s: “I found that Saxons are not as rational as they claim to be. In this particular instance of Cuba they were extremely emotional and quite irrational.” This was the condition that Under-Secretary David Newsom encountered more than 20 years later. “Few issues,” Newsom observed in 1987, “are as emotionally charged in American foreign policy as those relating to Cuba,” what Wayne Smith described as “a peculiarly emotional issue in the United States,” and adding: “Emotion is the enemy of pragmatism in Cuban relations. Cuba excites American passions as do few other foreign-policy issues, if any.”

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U.S. dealings with Cuba were thus inscribed in a policy formulation shaped within the experience of trauma and shock, from emotions that were themselves conditioned by historically-layered assumptions having to do with how Americans thought about Cuba. It has at least as much to do with psychology as it does with ideology, for it is a policy that has remained tethered to the complexities of emotional memory. This is to conceive policy as a social artifact, culturally derived and ideologically driven which, when turned in on itself, can be made to yield insight into the assumptions from which it has persisted long after it has been shown to have failed and is without prospects of success. The policy in this instance is received in trust and passed on as legacy: with assumptions so deeply embedded in prevailing normative hierarchies that they cease

to be apprehended at all. The policy has developed into something of a tradition to uphold, a commitment to keep faith with and to which eleven presidential administrations have—more or less—subscribed, in a manner not dissimilar to the way that Americans upheld the claims to Cuba during the nineteenth century.

A spectre haunts U.S. policy in the form of an unforgiving animus toward Cuba. Decades after the Bay of Pigs, former Under-Secretary of State George Ball continued to brood over Cuba and wrote in tones reminiscent of the ire of the early 1960s. “Castro’s Cuba formed an overhanging cloud of public shame and obsession,” Ball wrote in 1992. “Many Americans felt outraged and vulnerable that a Communist outpost should exist so close to their country. Castro’s Soviet ties seemed an affront to our history.”

How then to engage a government that has “affronted” American history. Perhaps insisting that Cubans apologize, something of a *mea culpa* for the transgressions of the twentieth century. Circumstances recall the conditions that President Ronald Reagan offered as the basis of rapprochement with the *sandinistas*: “If the present [Nicaraguan] government would turn around and say ‘Uncle.’” When asked under what conditions the United States would consider normalization of relations with Cuba, Reagan responded: “What it would take is Fidel Castro, recognizing that he made the wrong choice quite a while ago, and that he sincerely and honestly wants to rejoin the family of American nations and become a part of the Western Hemisphere.” President George Bush similarly encouraged Castro “to lighten up,” vowing: “Unless Fidel Castro is willing to change his policies and behavior, we will maintain our present policy toward Cuba.” Roz Chast titled her 1995 *New Yorker* cartoon “What Castro Can Do” to return to the good graces of the United States: “He ought to say how sorry he is for all the pain he’s caused everybody, and beg us to forgive him. Tears wouldn’t hear either.”

That the present Cuban government remains in place and remains unrepentant and, moreover, includes many of the same men associated with the “historic leadership” of the revolution, and that it has successfully defied 50 years of U.S. efforts at regime change, survived

the collapse of the Soviet Union, and withstood Torricelli and Helms-Burton, serves to add one more dimension to American pique.

The policy bears traces of early umbrage at Cuba for deeds done decades ago. Memory of Cuban transgressions endures long after the Cold War ended. Condoleezza Rice acknowledged a “deep disdain” for Fidel Castro based principally on a 40-year-old memory: “Fidel Castro,” she wrote, “whom I remembered mostly for his shortsighted decision to place Soviet missiles aimed at the United States on his territory.” Knowledge of Castro as “remembered mostly” for October 1962 sixty years later suggests the power of memory to perpetuate Cold War animus.

Efforts to change U.S. policy have typically been resisted through the invocation of memory. “Let’s be clear,” Senator Mel Martínez reminded the Senate in 2009, “the Castro regime, under Fidel and Raul Castro, then—as they are today—in power, wanted first strike nuclear attacks against the United States. Fidel Castro urged the Russians to let the missiles fly toward our soil These things perpetrated by the Castro brothers who were in power in 1959, and who remain in power today.” Nor did the succession of Raúl Castro to the presidency change anything. On the contrary, with regard to October 1962, Martínez insisted, Raúl Castro was “the real Communist. It was Raul Castro who first went to the Soviet Union and made deals with them about beginning this arms buildup that led to the missile crisis that put the world in peril”

Policy persists as a matter of punitive purpose, what Congresswoman Nancy Johnson discerned during the debates on the proposed Torricelli legislation, a “bill [that] seeks to punish Castro,” and certainly implied by Congressman Robert Terricelli’s comment conveying a vengeful desire “to wreak havoc on that island.” The policy retains punitive intent to settle scores, to bring Cuba to heel and return to the fold the small wayward island nation that dared to challenge the premise of U.S. power and seemed to have forgotten that the island was a “territory that God and nature intended to be a part of the United States.”

Cuba is more than a place, it is a state of mind, a mind-set possessed of a proper history that has assumed something of a national condition with antecedents deep in the nineteenth

century. A policy in place for more than 50 years has assumed a life of its own: its continuance has no other purpose other than to serve as justification its own longevity.

The prospects of reconciliation with Cuba under the present circumstances are dim indeed. It would require remarkable political courage to challenge a policy legacy so loaded with emotional content. Reasonable, rational, and reflective deliberations on Cuba have never been easy. Nothing seems to have changed. Rapprochement may well have to await the inexorable toll of actuarial remorselessness.