

Humanitarian Capitulation: U.S.- Cuba Relations According to the Council on Foreign Relations

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The Council on Foreign Relations is a strange and wondrous arena for policy-making. On one hand, it issues self-righteous bromides on *Humanitarian Intervention*,* from which even its ardent participants feel compelled to dissociate themselves. In the words of one of them, Dov Zakheim:

Let us be honest with ourselves. The criteria for intervention have had less to do with the nature of any particular humanitarian crisis than with much more mundane concerns such as power balances, state interests, and military feasibility.

Paradoxically, the Council has also become the fulcrum and spearhead of the Cuba Lobby—those seeking the establishment of normal diplomatic and social relations with Communist Cuba. One might describe these as advocates of humanitarian capitulation. The contradiction between an activist military posture in Yugoslavia and a pacifist civil approach to Cuba remains an inexplicable contradiction in American foreign policy.

Heading the group advocating normalization with Cuba are two distinguished public servants: Bernard Aronson, who served as assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs between 1989 and 1993 in the Bush administration, and William Rogers, Undersecretary of State for Latin American Relations from 1969-1973 in the Nixon administration. The fact that both are, presumptively at least, Republicans, underscores a point repeatedly made in the reports of this working group: their bipartisan character. Despite this, judging by the political positions of many members and observers, more Democratic than Republican figures are represented. In the world of political flimflam, political allegiances are not incidental to those in search of fame. The draft of the second report of the Aronson-Rogers commission of the Council on Foreign Relations, entitled “U.S.-Cuban Relations in the 21st Century” ** continues proposals earlier issued in January 1999 as a Report of an Independent Task Force of the same name, one also sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations. The 1999 report was a nervous effort to find common ground in liberal and conservative views on Castro’s Cuba, and was issued with the obvious goal of changing U.S. policy. This new effort is

far more assured and outspoken in pursuing an accommodation between the two nations. Underlying its assumptions is the belief that Castro's Cuba, given half a chance, will march down the road of democracy. In congressional testimony as well as other publications, I have addressed my reservations and fears about the accommodations made in the initial report.*** Here I focus my discussion on this revised effort—one dedicated to sharply altering the course of American foreign policy toward Communist Cuba.

My expressed concerns as to the purpose of the 1999 report have been entirely confirmed by this "Follow-On Report." If not for the sponsorship of the Council on Foreign Relations, I seriously doubt that this report would receive even casual attention in policy-making bodies of government despite its pretentious rhetoric. But that organizational legitimacy, matched by the qualifications of the members and observers associated with this independent task force, compels serious review of its contents. I should add that as a member of the Council on Foreign Relations for more than thirty years, I feel not just a right, but an obligation to enter a dissenting opinion.

This "Follow-On Report" spells out policies more or less unstated in the 1999 Report. Like all documents aimed at policy-making through consensus building, this one rests on a series of presuppositions. These must be examined. The first assumption is that a shift in American foreign policy requires only bipartisan agreement on *procedures*, not changes in actions by the other side. In the words of the report:

. . . the spread of information, new ideas, and fresh perspectives, through expanded human contact, can help break the isolation of, and expand engagement in, Cuba.

The second, even more disastrous assumption follows from the first. It is that *unilateral* policy making by itself can change the situation on the ground in Cuba. The document ignores Castro's current foreign and domestic policy, or treats it in broad generalities. It conveys no awareness that in Castro the United States is dealing with an unyielding dictator determined to bring the singular major world power to heel.

Given the substantial dubiousness of the document's assumptions, the four "baskets" of recommendations that follow can best be seen as a wish list developed in Washington, D.C. with little or no regard to actual current events in Cuba. Indeed, the report has a "Wizard of Oz" sensibility, prepared in isolation from Cuban realities. This is both disconcerting and disheartening. An essential premise of diplomacy, in all negotiations between rivals, whether at the personal or national level, is a trade-off of interests. Both parties must make accommodations to achieve new advantages that could not otherwise be gained. In the absence of even a remote sense of the empirical conditions that prevail in Cuba, the wish becomes father to the act. The limited prospects for policy revisions in the face of Castro's determined opposition to the United States—and all that it stands for in the policy arena—are simply disregarded or purposely overlooked.

The Report plays a peculiar shell game. On one hand it advocates near total overhaul of American foreign policy toward Cuba. On the other hand it makes no effort to define the terms by which new policies might be evaluated. The assumption is that all of the recommendations proffered will immediately result in a more benign dictatorship, and ultimately lead to the fall of the regime after the evidence of its own cruelties is made clear by American benevolence. The likelihood that the unilateral implementation of the report's four baskets of recommendations would further entrench Castro's more than forty years of rule is not even considered, let alone debated. In a bizarre outcome, the most powerful nation on earth throws a series of lifelines to the world's longest-standing Communist dictatorship on the assumption that good things will happen. If such unstated assumptions and suppositions were forthrightly presented, one might be tempted to take the Aronson-Rogers report seriously. Because they are not, one must explore the probable consequences of their cogitation.

The Aronson-Rogers report is divided into four "baskets." The first consists of proposals involving family reunification and migration. With each "basket" the U.S. is the donor and Cuba the recipient. For example, ending restrictions on family visits entails ending restrictions on visitations of Cuban Americans to Cuba; it does not posit that in turn Cubans will be allowed to visit the U.S. This basket also advocates lifting the ceiling on remittances to relatives by U.S. citizens, leaving such matters in the hands of individuals. It provides no safeguards that remitted monies would actually end up in the hands of family members or escape "taxation" by the Castro government.

Couched as they are in humanitarian language, these proposals would allow island-resident Cubans to be claimed as dependents for U.S. income tax purposes, and permit Cubans to visit the U.S. to take unimpeded advantage of the opportunity of seeing their relatives. The proposals call for increasing legal immigration from Cuba, a review board for assessing potential migrants, expanded consular services; and it urges the prosecution of alien smugglers who facilitate illegal immigration. Finally, the Report urges that migration becomes routine, that is to say a fixed number of people to gain admittance each year. These proposals seem innocuous enough, save for the fact that they are proffered with absolutely no requirement for reciprocity on the part of Castro. Indeed, every proposal indicates a decidedly indifferent view toward genuine reciprocity. Fidel might welcome an infusion of money; he would not welcome the sort of free market society implied by such recommendations. Behind the veil of humanitarianism is the arrogance of power, exercised unilaterally, and undermining of the prospects for Cuban society getting beyond Castro in the near future.

The second basket concerns the spread of information and new ideas. Operating under the presumption that the free flow of ideas alone will produce contagious results, the task force advocates issuing a general license for travel to Cuba by all Americans, making federal funds available for people-to-people exchanges to promote growth in nongovernmental institutions in Cuba, and direct commercial flights and ship service between major American cities and Havana,

Santiago, and Camaguey in Cuba. At this point, there is a subtle shift in baskets (clusters of issues) from human rights concerns to an entire revision of U.S. foreign policy. The assumptions are startling. The Cuban government is presumed to be willing to open its small cities as well as Havana to free travel, and even to permit its citizenry free access to the Internet and other forms of the new information technology. All evidence indicates the reverse to be the case—Cuban policy in these areas is to restrict communication and travel alike. Levels of repression have increased, not decreased, in the past several years.

Beyond the absence of any requirement of reciprocity is a leap of faith: the assumption that dictatorship will evolve into democracy as a consequence of open exchanges. Castro's continued insistence on a single leader, single party and managed economy argues against such undue optimism. One should assume that Castro would accept all sorts of arrangements with respect to expanded travel and yet continue the monolithic power he has exercised for forty-plus years. A basic flaw in the Report's assumptions is the notion that there is an inexorable transition "from Communism to democracy" once any changes are initiated. It is true that this has occurred on a selective basis in Eastern Europe, with mixed results, especially in Russia. The Chinese case is more instructive. Indeed, the Chinese model, studied so vigorously by the Cuban leadership, allows for just such "open windows" at the economic level, while maintaining tight controls at the political level. A more accurate representation of the *optimal* changes in the short run is a transition from dictatorial to civic—or civilian—rule. There is a large jump from dictatorship to civic society, but an even larger one between civic societies organized along authoritarian lines and those with democracy as a goal. Given the fact that Castro's Cuba has repeatedly and unambiguously rejected even modest accommodations toward civil rule, the unstated expectations of the Aronson-Rogers Report can most generously be described as utopian.

The third basket offered in the Report pertains to security. More directly, it concerns the role of the military in "moving down the road to civilian control in a future democratic state." If the second basket is best viewed as utopian, this third basket can only be described as incredibly myopic. The idea that the Cuban military can assume such an independent political role ignores everything from its origins in the anti-Batista guerrilla movement, to the ideological cleansing of its officer corps following the Ochoa affair, in the late 1980s. The Ochoa affair, with its summary execution of a leading figure in Cuba's overseas activities, resulted in the breakdown rather than an extension of professionalization within the Cuban armed forces. Over time, the armed forces have become more, not less, allied to the dictatorship. In essence they are the praetorian guard of the Castro regime.

This third bundle of goodies is divided into a simple triad: military-to-military contacts, the continuation of counter-narcotics contacts, and cooperation on mutual interests in regional security. Each of these proposals is so preposterous that it would take a man from Mars not to recognize them as such. To start with, military-to-military contacts, even if they were permitted, would be extraordinarily dangerous without the total commitment to such a project by Castro and the

party leadership. This is unlikely, not only because of continuing U.S.-Cuba hostilities, but also the strong opposition of the Organization of American States (O.A.S.) to Cuban expansionism and adventurism in the hemisphere over the years. Any Cuban officer seeking to establish direct contact with the U.S. military would more likely be shot for treason by Castro rather than celebrated for his forward-looking vision.

If one takes the Ochoa affair at face value, it appears that major figures in the Cuban armed forces were themselves deeply immersed in narco-trafficking. The possibility that Castro himself has been involved in the narcotics trade makes the Cuban armed forces an improbable partner in the hemispheric struggle against drug trafficking. As for mutual interests in regional security, this depends on whose security the Aronson-Rogers Report has in mind. At the moment, the Castro government sees its “security” as allied with the new dictatorship of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela. Both consider the guerrilla movements in Colombia and Peru—that threaten stability and civic rule in both countries—as potential allies. It has always been the dream of Fidel to build a revolutionary alliance along the northern tier of South America, a modern-day Bolivarist united front against the United States and its presumed continued belief in the Monroe Doctrine. To put forth as a serious proposal the idea of Cuban participation in a common front of “friendly nations” that would provide regional security—against the longstanding allies of Castro no less—is at best naïve, and at worst dangerous. This is an astonishing example of the disconnect between the Report’s policy proposals and the empirical realities in the outside world. In this report the two never meet.

The fourth (and happily) final basket pertains to trade, investment, and property and labor rights. Here, one must acknowledge that a degree of realism filters through the cloud of ideological baggage. Certain humanitarian measures have already been implemented, such as the termination of sanctions on food and medicine exports. The second element, the export of informational products such as books, diskettes, and intellectual property in general, is, as the report acknowledges, already part of American foreign policy. Existing regulations are minimal on the part of the United States. The major limitation is impediments to the free distribution of information in Cuba. Even the establishment of private libraries has become an issue throughout Cuba. Castro has been bitterly resistant to any show of an open society, as evidenced by his monitoring of information allowed to enter Cuba, and the arrest and detention of foreign nationals for so much as collecting or disseminating information. Once again as throughout the Report, its authors failed to appreciate the host, in this case, the recalcitrant ruler of Cuba, Fidel Castro. The problem with Cuba is not training in high technology but the access of its people to any technology.

The final point, resolving expropriation claims, is well articulated and judiciously stated. The Report is correct: a forward-looking strategy is the best. For rather than require reimbursements for expropriations and brand-name piracy by the Cuban government, it is far wiser to develop a plan that permits Cuba to earn the money needed to satisfy U.S. claims through future business activity—both

within Cuba and on a worldwide basis. Whether property settlements are made on a company-to-company basis or a government-to-government basis is less important than the presence in Havana of a regime that is willing and able to support such negotiations. The elements of dialogue being proposed extending from licensing American business activities to enlarging the rights of the Cuban workers—are certainly negotiable. The question is, with whom?

It is evident from the sheer space this basket of recommendations is given in the Report that the Aronson-Rogers group sees the business community as the soft underbelly of Cuba. The desire to expand and grow is a universal commercial trait. It is not surprising that the Report devotes so much attention to business ends. Efforts to enlarge the rights of laboring men and women and people of color are within the framework of business goals, as is the proposal to have American universities establish management training and labor rights institutes. One fears however, that such proposals would make sense only in a post-Communist and post-Castro situation. The idea that Castro—the last great ideologue of Communism—would sanction advanced training in business management, should bring a wry smile to the faces of those members of the Council on Foreign Relations commission who have any awareness of the regime over the last forty-two years.

That brings the discussion back to square one: how should the United States deal with the Castro regime? The Report supports the Cuban observer status at the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank. Its one sign of opposition to a capitulation is the recommendation that membership of Cuba in the Organization of American States be withheld. The underlying question is how long the Castro dictatorship as such will continue to exist. Castro's Cuba is not simply a Communist regime doggedly determined to survive in a sea of capitalist opposition, but one that continues to believe that the United States and Western democracy will collapse. Castro continues to assert that Communism represents the future—the end of the USSR and the rise of capitalist regimes in Eastern Europe notwithstanding.

Whatever the sources of Castro's vision: ideological rigidity, long-standing animosity for the United States, or belief in the political value of his position, the plain fact is that he offers a unilateralist policy posture. There is to be no trade-off, bargaining, or bartering with the United States. Sanctions are to be terminated and the embargo lifted without even a semblance or appearance of a quid pro quo. The Aronson-Rogers Report simply accept these premises, and requires no action on the part of Castro either in the field of free elections and parties or in the simpler terrain of the free market. There is more than the faint whiff of the Neville Chamberlain approach to Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany at Munich in 1938: acquiesce in the demands of the dictator and he will soften his stance and see the values of reason and rejoining the community of civilized nations. While far less is at stake in 2001 Cuba than 1938 Germany, the same presumptions of rationality and civility obtain. And while this might buy short-term pacification of the region, it does little with respect to long-range goals of the United States, or for that matter immediate aims of the Cuban people for a democratic society.

In warming relations with the Castro dictatorship, the Aronson-Rogers approach runs the risk of freezing the situation with the Cuban nation.

No doubt the Aronson-Rogers group has received a plethora of private assurances from Castro and his cohorts that these proposals would be fairly received if proffered by the American government. But so too have a myriad of groups through the last four decades received similar private assurances. What remain in place are the public utterances, and the political demands of the Castro regime. What is said in urban cities at high noon in public squares and not at private parties at post-midnight soirees is the ultimate test of how to judge the credibility of a regime. In sorrow as well as in opposition, one can only say that the record indicates this Report, the latest and perhaps most powerful assault on American foreign policy toward Cuba over the decades, can go nowhere. It will prove an embarrassment to its sponsors, and to those who signed on to this document, and who should have known better. Ω

References

* Alton Frye (project director), *Humanitarian Intervention: Crafting a Workable Doctrine*. New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2000, 94 pp.

** Bernard W. Aronson and William D. Rogers (co-chairs), *U.S.-Cuban Relations in the 21st Century: A Follow-Up Report of the Independent Task Force on U.S.-Cuban Relations* (draft report first issued on October 10th, 2000, public announcement made on November 29th, 2000).

*** Irving Louis Horowitz, *Searching for the Soul of American Foreign Policy: The Cuban Embargo and the National Interest*. [Testimony delivered before the House Committee on International Relations, March 24, 1999.] Published in the Occasional Papers Series, Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies, University of Miami, September 2000).