

INTRODUCTION

NEIGHBORS

Imagine living in a neighborhood where the family across the street irritates you. It's a wide street, fortunately, so most of the time you can simply ignore them, but every so often they do something annoying—your kids go over to play with theirs and wobble back home with the marijuana giggles, or these neighbors welcome some out-of-town houseguests who are clearly up to no good, placing you nervously on guard until you see them leave. Or what about that morning when you awoke to discover that a few of their many children had pitched a tent in your front yard, complaining they can no longer endure living at home? They apparently intend to stay forever.

Then imagine that you try not to let all this bother you. You understand that these neighbors haven't had your advantages. They come from different stock—a "tropical" people, outwardly cheerful but hopelessly emotional and pathologically frenetic, investing most of their energy in billowy arm-waving and oral pyrotechnics. Style is fairly insignificant, of course, but when combined with the irresponsible behavior, it all adds up, sometimes to the point where you simply cannot take any more. That's when you march across the street to set them straight. Usually, you don't have to do anything more than raise your voice—they know the consequences when you get angry, so they quickly promise to behave better. Yet can they? Probably not without your help, which requires lots of solid advice and sometimes a modest loan but also makes you feel good. After you've set

them on the right path, you always return home with a sense of genuine accomplishment.

Then imagine you do this once too often.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT was called the Cuban Revolution. Of course, the revolution involved much more than shooing the Yankees back across the street, but this book focuses on the U.S.-Cuban relationship. It examines how the United States deals with a difficult neighbor. The story focuses on the island's revolutionary generation, which grew to maturity in a country characterized by widespread deprivation, extreme inequality, and extraordinary corruption. And, unfortunately, many Cubans of that generation were convinced that the United States bore much of the responsibility for the problems that faced them. The first chapter of this book explains what the dean of historians of Cuba meant when he wrote that "almost any comprehensive history of Cuba is, of necessity, a discourse on U.S.-Cuban relations."¹

This initial chapter also introduces Washington's mental image of Cuba, focusing on the widespread expectation that the United States would act as a guardian of the less-developed peoples of the Caribbean but emphasizing that the root of this hegemonic presumption was a benevolent disposition and an unshakable belief that proximity to the United States was the region's singular good fortune. Or, as an assistant secretary of state asserted in 1916, "Nature, in its rough method of uplift, gives sick nations strong neighbors."² Three months later the United States sent several hundred soldiers to lift up what was then Cuba's sickest province, Camagüey, where they stayed for five years.

The trouble *really* began several decades later, in 1959, when a group of rebels ousted a perfectly acceptable dictator and proceeded to cause more trouble than anyone could have imagined. "There was something on Cuba every five minutes," complained an exasperated secretary of state, Christian Herter, and while he and President Dwight D. Eisenhower at first tried to be accommodating, they soon lost patience and began planning the Bay of Pigs invasion. "There is a limit to what the United States in self-respect can endure," Eisenhower said when he announced the closing of the U.S. embassy, and when he handed John F. Kennedy the keys to the White House three weeks later, Eisenhower also passed along an admonition: "We cannot let the present government there go on."³

That was in 1961. Twenty years later, Eisenhower and Kennedy were both dead and buried, yet Fidel Castro was boasting that "we will still be here

in *another* 20 years.” Not if incoming U.S. president Ronald Reagan and his new secretary of state, Alexander M. Haig Jr., had anything to say about the matter. During the 1980 campaign, Reagan had proposed a blockade of Cuba, and now, at the first meeting of his national security team, Haig proposed going one step further: an invasion. Finding little support for the idea, the secretary pulled his principal deputy aside and gave him his first assignment: “I want to go after Cuba, Bud. I want you to get everyone together and give me a plan for doing it.”⁴

That was in 1981. Twenty years later, Ronald Reagan was dying of Alzheimer’s disease and Alexander Haig was a semiretired consultant padding around his Northern Virginia office in Hush Puppies, while George W. Bush had slipped on the presidential wingtips and was promising no letup: “I’ve got a plan to spread freedom,” he told a 2004 campaign audience, “not only in the greater Middle East but also in our own hemisphere, in places like Cuba.” But the second President Bush, like his nine immediate predecessors, had been obliged to focus on more important problems. He did not even mention the island in a wide-ranging foreign policy speech near the end of his tenure, and in reply to a question from the audience, he indicated that he was leaving the island’s fate to divine intervention: “One day the good Lord will take Fidel Castro away.”⁵

IMAGINE NOW, on the revolution’s golden anniversary, that your grandchildren ask you to explain U.S. policy during the half century after 1959. On a basic level, the answer is easy: We have been attempting to protect our interests. Specifically, Washington’s policy has reflected first the economic concerns of U.S. investors, then—and much more important—the security concerns of U.S. defense managers, and finally the electoral concerns of U.S. politicians, who have eagerly sought the support of Cuban Americans, some of whom are wealthy campaign contributors and several hundred thousand of whom vote in the crucial state of Florida. It’s that simple—an ever-varying mixture of economic, security, and domestic political interests—and if you think it will be enough of an explanation for your grandchildren, read no further.

But you’ll miss what makes this relationship so intriguing: underlying these everyday interests is an *ideology*, a set of tightly integrated beliefs that controls the way powerful countries like the United States have traditionally thought about smaller neighboring countries like Cuba. At the most rudimentary level, this book is simply a case study in an intellectual tradition stretching back to the fifth century, B.C., when Thucydides, chronicling the

conflicts among Greek city-states, captured perfectly the bedrock principle of what we today call realism: the strong will do what they want, and the weak will accept what they must. Realism is a part of our ideology—an important part.

Were Thucydides explaining U.S. policy toward the Cuban Revolution, he would begin with some basic data:

	United States	Cuba	Cuba as % of United States
Area	9,826,630 sq. km.	110,860 sq. km.	1.1
Population	301 million	11 million	3.7
Gross Domestic Product	\$13,860 billion	\$51 billion	0.4

Here, Thucydides would emphasize, is a modest island with an economy *1/250th* the size of its wealthy, continent-wide neighbor, which has used a substantial portion of its fabulous wealth to create the most powerful military in the history of the human race. And that raw strength has given politicians such as Vice President Richard Nixon the ability to tell voters that “the United States has the power, and Mr. Castro knows this, to throw him out of office,” and it has given cabinet members such as Alexander Haig the ability to ask President Reagan for a simple green light: “You just give me the word and I’ll turn that f—— island into a parking lot.”⁶

What Thucydides would have difficulty explaining—and what makes traditional realism an incomplete theory—is this: When the Cubans refused to accept what they must, their leaders were not thrown out of office and their island was not turned into a parking lot. This gives rise to the question that makes relations with this modest island fascinating for casual observers and especially relevant for theorists: How have Cubans managed to get away with it? For decades, the answer was that Cuba balanced U.S. power by enlisting the support of a rival superpower, but that answer, which was never more than partially correct, takes us only to about 1990, when the Soviet Union withdrew its support. A complete answer has to include the constraints that the modern world now imposes on the exercise of power.

This book accents the most elemental constraint, the need to maintain a sense of proportion, and emphasizes that it is not simply a good idea; it is mandatory. This constraint arose as humans became increasingly aware of the costs attached to every benefit, especially in international relations, where the potential costs have risen in lockstep with technology. For chronic but not acute aggravations such as Cuba, superpowers are now

especially wary of the opportunity costs, and a simple list of all the other issues confronting any superpower like the United States is sufficient to explain why Richard Nixon did not employ U.S. power to throw Castro out of office (in fact, Nixon largely ignored Cuba when he finally claimed the presidency), why President Reagan declined to endorse Secretary Haig's parking-lot solution, why President Bush left Cuba to the good Lord, and why presidential adviser Arthur Schlesinger Jr. said this about the one president who seemed to spend more time than any other on Cuba: "Castro was not a major issue for Kennedy, who had much else on his mind."⁷ It took JFK's best and brightest only three months—until the Bay of Pigs—to discover that Cubans were going to fight back. We could certainly make them accept what they must, but not with a couple of thousand Cuban exiles; we would have to do it ourselves, with the U.S. Marines, and they might indeed have to turn the island into a parking lot. Victory would be ours, but at an especially exorbitant price in the currency that might matter most, world opinion.

So what was Plan B? After a few years of what we today would call state-sponsored terrorism—of sabotaging power plants, torching sugar fields, and arming assassins—U.S. policymakers slowly reached a consensus that Cuba was not all that important and that the logical course of action was to back off. During the Kennedy era, "I used to get a call from McGeorge Bundy or one of his assistants every day about something," recalled the State Department's principal Cuba officer, but then "under Johnson, the calls dropped down to probably once a week, and then maybe once every two weeks or once a month." Inexperienced in foreign affairs, Lyndon Baines Johnson had waited only a few days after inheriting the White House to seek advice from the widely respected chair of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, J. William Fulbright, who warned against doing anything dramatic. "I'm not getting into any Bay of Pigs deal," Johnson interrupted to agree. "No, I'm just asking you what we ought to do to pinch their nuts more than we're doing."⁸

Nut-pinching has been U.S. policy ever since.

Why? Because even a superpower's resources are limited, and LBJ, like every one of his successors, had better ways to spend his political capital. Instead of ramping up Operation Mongoose, JFK's effort to overthrow the island's government, President Johnson initially chose to focus on domestic issues—a month after consulting with Fulbright, LBJ went before a joint session of Congress to declare the War on Poverty and to press for passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Thus distracted, Johnson had little time for

Cuba, especially as his administration's foreign policy eyes began to focus on Indochina. National security adviser McGeorge Bundy soon was encouraging everyone to face reality. "The chances are very good that we will still be living with Castro some time from now," he said; "we might just as well get used to the idea."⁹ Thucydides never would have said that.

In our time, only an administration misjudging the Cubans as an easy takedown (as JFK's did) or an administration underestimating the costs in political capital (as Jimmy Carter's did) would invest heavily in an island such as Cuba. All the rest have done what they felt they had to do to protect the ever-changing U.S. economic, security and political interests, but all have done so on the cheap, never treating Cuba as a problem requiring decisive action. "Of course the United States could turn the island into a parking lot," they seemed to say, especially after the end of the Cold War, "but it might distract the country from more important problems" such as combating terrorism or resolving the domestic issue du jour. In a world packed to overflowing with threatened interests and an unlimited number of domestic problems, small islands are simply not that important. Realists have to be realistic.

This moderation is a fascinating aspect of modern realism. When your grandchildren ask you to explain it, you can use Cuba. There is no better example of how we are obliged to control ourselves—and, therefore, of how today's foreign-policy-making process actually works.

BUT THERE IS MORE to the "Cuba" ideology than moderated realism. An additional part was largely hidden during the three decades when Washington justified its hostility by pointing to the revolutionary government's alignment with the Soviet Union. But then the Cold War ended, and the geostrategic shell cracked apart to reveal the existential core of the ideology underlying Washington's compulsion to march across the street and set everything straight: the United States simply could not stand aloof while the Cuban government misbehaved. Specifically, for the past two decades, we have been determined to do something to protect Cubans' human rights. Thus, when the Cold War ended and the United States needed new laws about Cuba, we gave them "human rights" titles, beginning with the 1992 Cuban Democracy Act and the 1996 Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act.

This was nothing new. Cold and hot wars come and go, but what remains constant is the belief that Cubans, like most of the people who live beneath the United States, will benefit from our humanitarian legislation. Cubans

are Hispanics and blacks, imperfect leaves on two stunted branches of the human species—not simply underdeveloped, but probably underdevelopable left to their own devices and given their origin. Or, as a U.S. ambassador wrote from Havana in the late 1940s, just as Cuba’s revolutionary generation was reaching adulthood, “Many of them possess the superficial charm of clever children, spoiled by nature and geography—but under the surface they combine the worst characteristics of the unfortunate admixture and interpenetration of Spanish and Negro cultures—laziness, cruelty, inconstancy, irresponsibility, and inbred dishonesty.”¹⁰

It is probably a sign of progress that U.S. diplomats no longer write such sentences, but today’s political correctness makes it more difficult to identify and examine this aspect of the ideology underlying U.S. policy. Perhaps that explains why it is so common to argue that today’s focus on human rights is only a ruse—that human rights offers a convenient rationale for a policy dictated by post-Cold War domestic politics, dictated specifically by the need to curry favor among the Cuban Americans who detest the Cuban Revolution, several hundred thousand of whom live in a state with twenty-seven electoral votes. Don’t tell this to your grandchildren—it’s wrong. Anyone who watched George W. Bush snatch the White House from Al Gore in 2000 understands how important Florida can be, but elections, like wars, come and go, while Washington’s civilizing mission remains a constant. Florida had only five electoral votes and there was no such thing as a Cuban American voter in 1901, when Congress passed the Platt Amendment granting the United States the right to march across the street whenever it wanted “for the maintenance of a government adequate for the protection of life, property, and individual liberty.”¹¹

Today this part of the ideology—a civilizing mission—remains largely hidden, embedded in a human rights context. Only occasionally does direct evidence of its existence pop to the surface, generally in an unscripted comment such as when a reporter asked the first President Bush if he intended to engage Fidel Castro now that the Soviet threat had disappeared. “What’s the point of my talking to him?” Bush replied. “All I’d tell him is what I’m telling you, to give the people the freedom that they want. And then you’ll see the United States do exactly what we should: Go down and lift those people up.”¹² President Bush’s immediate predecessor, Ronald Reagan, always answered that Cuba first had to end its alliance with Moscow, but here in 1991 how effortlessly a three-decade-long policy justified by the need to contain communism was replaced by a policy based on a conviction that Cubans’ lack of freedom triggered an obligation to help, to

uplift. Washington's new policy was to insist that the island's government be less repressive of its citizens' human rights.

Revealing as it may have been, President Bush's comment was a rarity—rare because it sounds bad to our postcolonial ears. Today we no longer feel comfortable about uplifting underdeveloped peoples, about the white man's burden. Now we have to examine behavior and then *infer* the commitment to a civilizing mission. This examination consumes a good many of the pages that follow, including a discussion of Washington's most recent plan for Cuba's uplifting, unveiled in 2004 by the President's Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba. It identified six major areas where Cubans could benefit from U.S. assistance, the first and most important of which was in selecting their leaders. This has been an especially consistent part of Washington's policy toward Cuba, stretching back to 1901, when Governor-General Leonard Wood, writing from Havana, put his pro-consular finger squarely on the problem: "No one wants more than I a good and stable government, of and by the people here, but we must see that the right class are in office."¹³

That also sounds presumptuous to us, so now we use a euphemism: "Hastening Cuba's Transition" is the title of Chapter 1 of the plan President Bush unveiled; it specified sixty-two steps the United States intended to take to oust Cuba's current repressive leaders. Then, after they have been replaced by the right class of people, it will be on to the uplifting: Chapter 2, "Meeting Basic Human Needs"; Chapter 3, "Establishing Democratic Institutions"; Chapter 4, "Establishing the Core Institutions of a Free Economy"; Chapter 5, "Modernizing Infrastructure"; and Chapter 6, "Addressing Environmental Degradation." And since some of the island's volatile residents might refuse to watch quietly while the United States sets everything straight, the plan also contains a still-classified security appendix, the gist of which is probably captured by an unclassified sentence indicating that some part of the U.S. government—the Pentagon?—will be standing by if needed "to keep all schools open during an emergency phase of the transition in order to keep children and teenagers off the streets."¹⁴

The unspoken conceptual framework—the *mentalité*—of the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba is that only a few die-hard revolutionaries and perhaps some immature adolescents would want to live in today's Cuba if, with Washington's help, they could meet basic needs, establish both democratic institutions and a free economy, build a modern infrastructure, and even tackle the problem of environmental degradation.

Since this is so obvious, simply to decline Washington's offer of uplifting is to set off an alarm: Why are Cubans behaving in an irrational way?

Cold War geopolitics at first dictated "communism" as the answer—it is impossible to work through the archives of the Eisenhower and Kennedy years and fail to be impressed by how genuinely worried everyone was. It was not simply a convenient justification for our hostility. In the apocalyptic version then common in the United States, communism threatened us with death and destruction, probably not with a direct attack but by slowly undermining vulnerable allies, one by one, until the United States stood alone in a hostile world. Then Nikita Khrushchev would have his way. "We will bury you," he had boasted in 1956, just as Cuba's rebels were planning their campaign against Fulgencio Batista's army. And, we need to remind ourselves, that was not said by someone whose best shot was to fly hijacked airliners into skyscrapers, however horrible that was. Khrushchev's finger rested on a nuclear button.¹⁵

With Moscow intent on depositing the Free World in the dustbin of history, the United States had to be particularly vigilant in the Caribbean, where physical proximity would make a communist beachhead especially threatening. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) director Allen Dulles insisted that the United States could not allow the establishment of such a beachhead: "As the evidence of a communist attempt at takeover is uncovered, it is vital to deal with it before it has permeated the society which it is attacking. . . . The longer one waits the more drastic must be the medicine. It is like cancer."¹⁶ Cuba was far too close for comfort, and the island's new leaders were declining every well-intentioned offer of uplifting; instead, they made no secret of their intention to reform Cuban society without Washington's assistance and to do so in the broadest sense of the word—to "re-form" more or less everything, including many things belonging to powerful U.S. citizens who liked their belongings just as they were.

When U.S. diplomats brought these investors' concerns to the attention of the new Cuban government, the country's leaders insisted that the United States respect their sovereign right to reform their own society: "The Cuban people are anxious to live in peace and harmony with the Government and the people of the United States," Cuba's revolutionaries said in a formal diplomatic note, "and they are also desirous of intensifying their diplomatic and economic relations, but on the basis of mutual respect." Thucydides did not believe in mutual respect between unequals, and the obvious asymmetries between the United States and Cuba led Washing-

ton's realists to believe they could do whatever they wanted. But then came the cold shower we call the Bay of Pigs, and thereafter a reasonable sense of proportion mandated caution. A final solution by U.S. forces—an invasion—would have “grave political dangers to our position throughout the Western hemisphere,” the State Department warned JFK in 1961.¹⁷ The world had changed since the Peloponnesian Wars, and by the mid-twentieth century, the leader of the Free World was not allowed to select the parking-lot option without incurring significant costs. Moscow used that approach for *its* neighbors, like Hungary, and U.S. citizens saw the difference as their trump card. And so Washington selected nut-pinching—an embargo that would make life as miserable as possible for everyday Cubans. Strangle the island's economy and eventually the regime would collapse; in the interim, Washington could focus on its many more important problems.

So far it has not worked, and your grandchildren will probably want to know if it ever will. Change is certain to come, but you should point out that the future is for others to narrate; for now, you can explain why the United States doggedly pursued one of the most unproductive policies in the history of U.S. foreign relations—a policy that has included everything from a CIA assassination plot featuring a ballpoint pen rigged with a hypodermic needle so fine that Fidel Castro would not notice he was being injected with poison (1963) to a U.S. Interests Section in Havana with a Times Square-style streaming electronic ticker running across its facade. The State Department uses the ticker to acquaint Cubans with the wisdom of representative U.S. thinkers such as rocker Frank Zappa: “Communism doesn't work because people like to own stuff” (2006).

You can talk until you are blue in the face about how every country protects its economic, security, and political interests and about how a half century of hostility really did not cost very much, but your grandchildren will find it difficult to understand what your elected representatives could have been thinking when they used even a modest part of your taxes to pay for the ballpoint pen and the ticker and everything that came in between. There is no quick answer. First you will have to tell them about the Cuba that existed before 1959, which explains why there was a revolution and helps explain why the revolution seemed so unwilling to accommodate Washington. Then you can mention Thucydides, but quickly point out how two millennia of amendments to his version of the law of the jungle have constrained superpowers; they now have to maintain a sense of proportion about small neighboring countries. They always have much larger fish to fry, and always with a limited supply of political capital. Tell your grandchil-

dren that superpowers sometimes do not get along with their small neighbors, but that does not mean you can turn their property into a parking lot. Most important, try to place all this in a long-term perspective, just as Fidel Castro did in a 1974 interview: “We cannot move, nor can the United States. Speaking realistically, someday some sort of ties will be established.” After all, he pointed out, “We are neighbors.”¹⁸