

Obamamania

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Fidel Castro

The world tuned in to the United States as polls began closing on November 4, 2008, and Cuba was no exception. The scene in Havana was about as bizarre as it gets. The annual international trade fair was under way, and U.S. politicians and businessmen were in town drumming up agricultural sales under the 2000 exception to the U.S. embargo that made their country the island's fifth largest trading partner at more than \$700 million that year, despite the Bush administration's hostility. The Americans were camped out to watch the returns at the famous Hotel Nacional, where Meyer Lansky and Charles "Lucky" Luciano once lived and the mob gathered for conferences. The U.S. government had invited dissidents to the chief of the U.S. Interests Section's residence, where they would be given the chance to participate in a mock vote to protest the lack of democracy on the island. The remaining 11.2 million Cubans followed the election returns as best they could by talking to relatives in the United States, listening to shortwave radio, and staying in contact with family and friends who had Internet access or worked at tourism establishments tuned to CNN.

My own first stop was the Hotel Nacional, where a delegation of officials and businessmen from Georgia, led by Agriculture Commissioner Tommy Irvin, was holding a reception. The state of Georgia went for John McCain, and although returns were still coming in, the mood was somber and Commissioner Irvin, a tall and lanky old-time southern politician of around seventy, was in a dour mood. I asked Irvin how his trip was going, and he scowled. "Fine." I asked him if he was for Obama or McCain, and he replied "McCain," barely holding back the "you idiot" from his thin, tight lips. I asked him how that squared with trading with Cuba, and he said, "Just look around you: there is plenty of trade with Bush and more will come with McCain." He strolled off across the room to chat with four or five other somber-looking fellows in suits, holding cocktail glasses and munching on canapés.

I was soon driving across town to the U.S. Interests Section chief's residence, where the police, as usual, were making life difficult by forcing guests to park a good fifteen minutes' walk away, a practice begun as relations deteriorated under President Bush. The U.S. government still owns a beautiful mansion in the diplomatic enclave called Cubanacán, on the western outskirts of Havana, complete with a swimming pool, tennis courts, and an elevator to the second floor, reportedly installed for Harry Truman. The sprawling backyard and garden feature a huge bronze American eagle that was toppled by a hurricane from a Havana monument to the victims of the battleship *Maine*, whose fates—when the ship blew up just off Havana Bay—led to U.S. intervention and the end of Spanish rule. The head of a second eagle erected atop the monument after the storm, and somehow rescued when it fell victim to the first days of Fidel Castro's Revolution, presides over the Interests Section's Eagle Bar. The mansion was the residence of U.S. ambassadors until diplomatic relations broke off in 1961, and it once more became the residence of the top U.S. diplomat on the island, the chief of the Interests Section, after the lower-level diplomatic rapprochement was accomplished under President Carter in 1977.

Some 150 dissidents, accompanied by a few dozen U.S. and other Western and Eastern European diplomats, had gathered at the residence on election night to drink, eat, and watch the returns. The "exercise in democracy," as U.S. diplomats billed it, had begun with the previous presidential election, when Castro's opponents overwhelmingly "voted" for then-president Bush. Pictures were soon splashed across the Cuban media of dissidents placing their symbolic ballots in the voting box for perhaps the most unpopular U.S. head of state in Cuban history. The event proved a no-brainer for Cuban government propagandists, who painted all opponents as U.S. mercenaries who represented no one. This time around, no cameras were allowed as the dissidents "voted" for John McCain. Their "vote" was again featured in the state-run media a few days later, this time without graphics.¹

I left the residence sometime around 11 p.m. to watch the returns with Cuban staff at the Comodoro Hotel, another piece of mob-owned Havana real estate before the Revolution. The scene at the Comodoro bar, where a group of a dozen employees and a lone hooker had gathered to watch CNN, was very different from the one I had left at the U.S. residence. Everyone except the hooker was young to middle-aged, and mulatto to black, and the pride of both the men and the women was unmistakable. Hope glittered in their eyes as they watched the victorious Obamas proclaim victory in Chicago. They asked me if this meant that fifty years of hostility would end and that big-tipping Americans would soon arrive. I said I wouldn't be surprised. I asked them whether they were so enthusiastic about Obama because he was African American,

young, intelligent, progressive, or just not George W. Bush. Their reply: “All of the above.” The hooker, in her late thirties, sat down at my table to join the conversation and hit me up for at least one drink. I obliged, and she beamed and toasted Obama, “To a brand new day.”

I have no doubt most Cubans felt the same way as those gathered at the Comodoro bar, while their “future leaders” who voted for McCain at the U.S. residence obviously did not, and their current leaders no doubt understood that they faced a completely new situation after their fifty-year standoff with Washington, and a unique, if daunting, challenge in Barack Obama.

On election eve a still all-but-invisible Fidel Castro weighed in with one of his reflections, repeatedly broadcast on state-run television and radio, which set the tone for the coming months.

Tomorrow will be of great significance. The world will be following the elections in the United States. It is the most powerful nation on Earth. . . . He [Obama] supports the system and will be supported by it. The pressing problems of the world are not really a major source of concern for Obama.²

Fidel Castro would set to work trying to dampen his people’s expectations, even as Obama, as he had promised during his campaign, made some changes in policy aimed at the Cuban regime’s soft underbelly, while strengthening enforcement of economic sanctions. Castro argued in his writings that no matter how attractive and sincere Obama might be, he was now president of “the empire” that would tie his hands and that, besides, the new U.S. president wasn’t all he was made out to be. “Somebody had to offer a calm and serene response even though this will have to swim up the powerful stream of hopes raised by Obama in the international public opinion,” Castro wrote, at the end of a scathing criticism of Obama soon after he was elected.³

Perhaps Fidel Castro wanted to undermine any hope of improved relations, but it is far more likely that he really believed a single man could do little to change U.S. foreign policy and the internal dynamics of the U.S. political and economic system. “Obama is somebody we can talk to anywhere he wishes since we do not preach violence or war. He should be reminded, though, that the stick and carrot doctrine will have no place in our country,” Castro wrote in the same column.⁴ A few days after Obama took office, on January 22, Castro said, in another reflection:

No one could doubt the sincerity of his [Obama’s] words as he stated that he would turn his country into a model of freedom and respect for human rights in the world and for the independence of other peoples. . . . How-

ever, . . . Obama has not taken the main test: What will he do when the immense power he now has proves to be absolutely useless to overcome the insoluble antagonist contradictions posed by the system?⁵

The Cuba Lobby

The Bush administration, which owed a great deal to Florida's Cuban American political and economic establishment and shared a similar ideology, managed to repress majority sentiment in the business community and the U.S. Congress for loosening the embargo. Bush threatened to veto any measures loosening sanctions, and instead tightened them through executive orders and more aggressive enforcement. That all seemed to change overnight with Obama's election. He won the country and Florida without kowtowing to exiles to whom, in fact, he owed little. The anti-embargo Cuba lobby inside and outside Congress sprang back to life. Amendments tweaking Bush-era travel and other restrictions on Cuban Americans and amendments making the food trade a bit less difficult were swiftly attached to a larger spending bill and signed by Obama.⁶ Bills were introduced to remove all travel restrictions on Americans, loosen food-trade regulations, and lift the embargo completely, and congressional committees were soon holding hearings on Cuba policy. Think tanks and policy groups quickly issued reports on the best way to approach Havana and untangle fifty years of enmity and sanctions, as they had to no avail after the collapse of European Communism in the early 1990s and would again in 2013 as Obama began his second term. Dozens of business groups, from the Chamber of Commerce and Business Round Table to the Farm Bureau and trade organizations such as the American Travel Association and the Rice, Wheat, and Poultry Associations, quickly joined the rising chorus for a new Cuba policy.⁷

But it was the dramatic changes under way in Latin America well before Obama took office that were the decisive factor at work as a new era apparently dawned in U.S.-Cuba relations. Country after country had elected left-of-center presidents who called for regional unity and greater independence from the United States. These men and women viewed Cuba as a symbol both of resistance to U.S. domination and of their nations' independent aspirations—despite the island's different political, social, and economic system to which almost all, to varying degrees, took exception.

Raúl Castro traveled to Venezuela and then Brazil in December 2008, his first trip abroad since officially taking over for his brother earlier in the year. Castro's destination was a Latin American and Caribbean summit on integra-

tion and development, hosted by Brazil, where regional history was made. The summit voted unanimously to admit Cuba to the Rio Group of area countries, a far weaker version of the Organization of American States, but without the United States and Canada. The Rio Group became the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States in 2011, comprised of all thirty-three Latin American and Caribbean nations, and with Raúl Castro again present voted to hold its 2012 annual meeting in Chile and the next year's in Cuba.

The heads of state gathered in Brazil, including those most closely allied with Washington at the time—Mexico, Colombia, Peru, El Salvador, and Costa Rica—wished Fidel Castro well and lamented that he was not present for the occasion. The summit called on the incoming Obama administration to end unilaterally all sanctions against the island and normalize relations. It was an historic and emotional moment, a stunning diplomatic victory for Havana and a unanimous show of support for the island as it faced the incoming U.S. administration. Fourteen Caribbean heads of state had met in Santiago de Cuba less than two weeks before to prepare for the summit, discuss cooperation, make similar demands on Washington, and bestow their highest honor on Fidel Castro.⁸

Democracies are taking hold in the Latin American region after more than a century of alternating in many countries with military coups and dictatorships, violent revolutions and counterrevolutions. The revolutions often had the support of Cuba, and the counterrevolutions were invariably in alliance with local oligarchies and Washington to squash the nationalism and demands for social justice that arise in the most polarized region (in terms of wealth) on the planet, which some referred to at the time as the United States' backyard. It was ironic and, no doubt for many in the West, bizarre, that an increasingly democratic Latin America and Caribbean would welcome Cuba back into the fold and hail the area's only remaining and most famous dictator. Then again, Cuba had long since renounced armed revolution; Cuba had denounced the extraordinarily bloody dictatorships from which some countries were still emerging even as the United States supported them; Cuba had backed local opposition to the dictatorships and provided refuge for thousands of the men and women fleeing imprisonment, torture, and being disappeared; Cuba had vigorously supported the emergence of Caribbean nations from colonial rule; Cuba had given refuge to many of the friends of now-sitting heads of state; Cuba had achieved much in terms of health, education, civil defense, and general social security and peace, and was sharing those gains with its neighbors.

Spain's domination of Cuba, and efforts by other European colonial powers to wrest the "always-loyal island" from the Spanish crown, had more to do with the riches of the region than those of the largest of the Antilles itself. The size

and location of the island make it the natural gatekeeper between Europe and the Americas and an ideal way station for shipping between them. The United States' relations with Cuba had never been a purely bilateral affair either, but multilateral, tied to the Monroe Doctrine that viewed the region as an exclusive U.S. domain (much as Russia had always viewed its neighbors).

Raúl Castro, speaking to the press in Brasilia after the summit, said the embargo was finished, and he outlined Cuba's position for future talks with the Obama administration.

It's been almost fifty years now; it's time for it to end, it's dying. . . . It's time to start getting ready, because the blockade has no perspective. The gentleman, the president of the United States said during his election campaign that he will ease the blockade, but if it's maintained, that is the carrot and the stick.⁹

With the end of Fidel Castro's rule, and his death apparently near, the United States' main allies—from Canada and Europe to Japan, India, Mexico, and Brazil—were all doubling their efforts to engage Havana. The European Union in 2008 dropped all the political and economic sanctions it had imposed after the 2003 crackdown on dissent, although it maintained the “common position” adopted in 1996, which set political reform as a condition for joint economic cooperation. The position was adopted in exchange for a U.S. pledge not to apply to EU companies the extraterritorial sanctions contained in the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity (Libertad) Act of 1996, better known as the Helms-Burton Act. For decades many European and Latin American leaders, under pressure from Washington, had insisted on meeting with dissidents whenever those leaders happened to be in Cuba. No more. The mix of brave souls, government agents, and charlatans looking for money and visas had proved impotent when Fidel Castro stepped aside in 2006. According to a number of Havana-based diplomats, a series of factors combined to leave them out of the diplomatic loop: Cuban government pressure; the dissidents' inability to influence events when Castro stepped aside; the rise of a new generation of cyber dissidents, led by pioneer blogger Yoani Sánchez; and the realization that Cubans within the Grey Zone and institutions such as the Roman Catholic Church would prove far more important to Cuba's future, even if they did not openly ally themselves with the United States.

Read My Lips

A parade of Latin American presidents traveled to Cuba soon after the Brazil summit to meet physically with and demonstrate their respect for the Cas-