



# The Making of an Embargo

*U.S.-Cuban Relations, 1959–1980*

**T**HE UNITED STATES and Cuba share a complicated and interconnected history. A full examination of this history, particularly of the preembargo (and pre-Cuban revolution) period, is beyond the scope of this book, which focuses on the politics of Cuba policy from the Reagan administration to the present.<sup>1</sup> We try here, however, to orient readers, especially those less familiar with the background of U.S.-Cuban relations, to the dynamics of U.S.-Cuba policy from the time of the Cuban revolution to the election of Ronald Reagan. Following the rise of Fidel Castro, U.S. presidents from Eisenhower through Carter struggled to find ways to isolate Castro and Cuba and to force Castro's demise. When Cuba moved inside the Soviet sphere as the U.S. embargo took hold, the embargo became embedded in the politics of the cold war. The U.S. had long been Cuba's major trading partner; now the Soviet Union would become her main supporter. This early cold war period was also the era of the rise of the Imperial President, a time when presidents, working with select members of the executive branch and a few congressional leaders, made

Cuba policy with little intrusion from other domestic actors. From the imposition of the embargo by Executive Order, to the failed invasion at the Bay of Pigs, through failed attempts at restoring more normal relations during the détente of the 1970s, the president largely called the shots on Cuba policy during this period. The Eisenhower administration decided to end U.S. support for Cuban dictator Fulgencia Batista, but as Castro's communist positions took shape Ike eventually not only put in place the U.S. embargo policy but also set in motion plans for covert operations aimed against Castro and his government. As the embargo began under Eisenhower, we will discuss this period in a little more detail than the others in this chapter. President Kennedy presided over the failure at the Bay of Pigs but nonetheless continued efforts, as he tightened the embargo, to covertly topple Castro. President Johnson not only continued Kennedy's policy toward Cuba, he intensified the effort to isolate Cuba in the hemisphere. Near the end of the Nixon administration, and in the Ford and Carter administrations, some efforts were undertaken to ease relations with Cuba. The politics of Cuba policy, and the players who had access to power over that policy, began to change in this period. Congress became more engaged, and U.S. business interests began to suggest that there would be economic benefits to ending the embargo. Ultimately, these moves toward more normal relations ended with Cuban military adventures in Africa. Presidents made Cuba policy in this period, though their hold on the process was slipping as the 1980s approached. Below, we review the historical highlights of this period and draw attention to the ways that the dynamic of presidential control over Cuba policy began to evolve.

### **Eisenhower's Break**

The U.S. relationship with Cuba was a complicated one. The Platt Amendment guaranteed a measure of U.S. control over affairs on the island from 1903 until Franklin Roosevelt ended the policy in 1934. A series of trade agreements and sugar acts then gave Cuban sugar producers favorable access to the U.S. market, but they also tied the Cuban economy to this single commodity and this market, giving the United States impressive

leverage over Cuba. An estimated 80 percent of Cuba's hard foreign currency came from the sugar trade with the United States. And U.S. corporations controlled much of the sugar industry on the island.<sup>2</sup>

During its first term in office, the Eisenhower administration provided reasonably consistent support for Cuban President Batista, but inadequate information and unfortunate decisions plagued them from 1956 until Castro's forces took power on January 1, 1959. A key example of their confusion was that the new U.S. ambassador to Cuba in 1957, Earl E. T. Smith, had Wall Street experience but no diplomatic background; he did not even speak Spanish.<sup>3</sup> Ambassador Smith supported Batista and distrusted Castro more than many in the Eisenhower administration, particularly within the State Department.<sup>4</sup> In Washington, a vague sentiment emerged that the best possible outcome to the growing insurgency in Cuba would entail a continuity of *Batistianismo* without Batista. Not surprisingly, it proved easier to undermine longtime client Batista than to reverse the momentum generated by Castro's forces while Washington hoped for a non-Batista and non-Castro solution. Arms shipments to Cuba were suspended in mid-March 1958, and not long after a meeting in which Smith informed Batista that the U.S. government would no longer support him, the dictator fled the island on New Year's Eve that year, ushering Castro into power.

From the U.S. recognition of the new Cuban government on January 7, 1959, until the time that President Eisenhower broke diplomatic relations with Cuba in January 1961, the anti-Castro position grew steadily within the Eisenhower administration. Some of that sentiment was clearly due to a number of developments on the island. During the first month in power, the revolutionary government permitted the Communist party to operate freely, and it began a series of trials that led to the execution of a number of former officials in the Batista regime. These decisions, as well as Castro's declaration that he would head the country without elections, set the context for the Cuban president's trip to the United States in April 1959. While much of his tour, sponsored by the American Society of Newspaper Editors, was received favorably,<sup>5</sup> Castro's meeting with Vice President Nixon had the greatest impact on U.S. policy. On the basis of a meeting in which Nixon concluded that the

Cuban president was either “incredibly naïve” or a completely disciplined communist, the vice president later wrote: “I became a leading advocate for efforts to overthrow Castro.”<sup>6</sup>

Castro’s announcement that he would pursue agrarian reform on the island set new actors in and out of the U.S. government into motion. Property owners, particularly sugar growers, paid a heavy financial price and communicated their desire for action against Cuba to the Eisenhower White House.<sup>7</sup> Along with U.S. property holders, increasing numbers of Cubans fled the island following the May expropriation of farmlands greater than one thousand acres. By the fall of 1959 congressional and media criticism of the U.S. policy of “cautious” diplomacy was becoming more widespread.<sup>8</sup> But Eisenhower’s problem, as biographer Stephen Ambrose notes, was that while Cuba was important to U.S. foreign policy, it was not *that* important in relative terms. Ike was not yet ready to invest significant resources in driving Castro from power, and he was certainly not going to send in the Marines.<sup>9</sup>

The public face of cautious diplomacy masked the more aggressive activity the Eisenhower administration was beginning to undertake to support Castro’s opponents on the island and in exile. In a National Security Council (NSC) meeting, Vice President Nixon proposed support for an exile force that would be armed for military intervention against Castro.<sup>10</sup> While that idea was put on hold then, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) pursued related activities over the next several months, including smuggling Castro opponents out of Cuba and sending arms to known opposition forces in Cuba.<sup>11</sup> Ike’s mood toward Castro, and with it support for a more aggressive policy toward the Cuban leader, would begin to change by late 1959 and early 1960, however.

Late in October 1959, Eisenhower approved a plan from the State Department and CIA to support Castro’s opponents in Cuba, including raids by Cuban exiles against the island from U.S. territory. These initial plans ultimately led to a March 17, 1960, Oval Office meeting where President Eisenhower approved the outlines of a plan for covert action against the Castro government. Among the specifics of that plan were the creation of a radio station to broadcast into Cuba; a covert intelligence and action organization within Cuba; and the beginning of training for a paramilitary force outside Cuba that could be deployed into that country.<sup>12</sup> Eisen-

hower especially emphasized the need for finding a Cuban leader living in exile who could be recognized to form a new government.<sup>13</sup>

These plans for covert action against Cuba were made by the president and his close advisers largely without congressional consultations or public notice. But Congress was not inactive in the spring and summer of 1960. A proposal emerged from the House Foreign Affairs Committee at the end of March to terminate U.S. economic aid to Cuba unless the president determined that assistance was “in the national and hemispheric interest.”<sup>14</sup> That bill passed both houses and was ultimately signed by the president. Eisenhower also wanted Congress to grant him the flexibility to unilaterally alter the existing sugar quota, which he eventually got. The covert operations, including the attempts to sabotage sugar production, were now supplemented by the prospect of formal economic sanctions.

Meanwhile, Eisenhower and Castro engaged in a series of back and forth steps that would ultimately lead to the end of U.S. diplomatic relations with Cuba. In October 1960, Eisenhower prohibited U.S. oil refineries in Cuba from refining Soviet crude oil, drastically cut the Cuban sugar quota, and imposed an economic embargo on all trade with Cuba except food and medicine. U.S. officials expected that Cuban-American trade would fall from \$1.1 billion in 1957 to about \$100 million; U.S. direct investment in Cuba would fall from more than \$900 million to nothing.<sup>15</sup> For his part, Castro confiscated U.S. oil refineries, nationalized U.S.-owned and other foreign-owned property, and ordered the U.S. embassy staff to be dramatically cut back. While European allies may have urged Eisenhower to appear reasonable and moderate, he needed to project a tough image to discourage other Cubas from emerging in the hemisphere, and the domestic political incentives nearly all pointed toward getting tough on Castro. Congress received Ike’s initiatives (those they knew about) “uncritically for the most part.”<sup>16</sup> The real forcefulness of Eisenhower’s Cuba policy—sabotage and the training of a Cuban exile invasion force—would not become widely known until after he left office. The initiative behind U.S.-Cuba policy clearly rested in the White House, as might have been expected. While the media may have helped shape U.S. public opinion toward accepting Castro as a reasonable figure by way of the famous Castro interview by Herbert Matthews of the *New York Times* in the Sierra Madre mountains, there is little evidence of concern for or use of the media on the

part of Eisenhower administration officials as they debated the Castro-Batista dilemma in the months leading up to Castro's victory. A reasonable argument could be made that the narrow circle of influence lacked expertise on Cuba while policy was firmly in Ike's hands at this time.

The Eisenhower administration had made a key move in U.S. foreign policy in 1960 by placing anticommunism in the central position. While Ike and his advisers could not be sure that Castro posed much of an immediate threat to U.S. security and interests in Latin America, they became convinced that if allowed to go unchecked Castro's Cuba would pose such problems down the road. Eisenhower himself was unsure that sanctions would have much impact on Castro, but he pressed on in order to encourage Castro's opponents and to make a statement about U.S. power and credibility. Eisenhower ended diplomatic relations with Cuba on January 3, 1961, and suspended trade with the island, invoking the Trading with the Enemy Act, a few days later. While perhaps naively hoping to provoke Castro into overreacting, Eisenhower nevertheless had clearly staked U.S. policy toward the island as linked to the broad goals of anticommunism and defense of American hegemony and power in the region.<sup>17</sup> The embargo policy had been born, and the path toward the Bay of Pigs was being built.

### **President Kennedy and Dangerous Relations**

When President Kennedy was sworn in as president he inherited invasion plans that were already well under way. The new president largely provided continuity both in terms of policy and the way that foreign policy decisions were made. Declassified documents of the Bay of Pigs, and conferences with key figures from both the U.S. and Soviet sides in the post-cold war years, have provided a wealth of information regarding U.S. decision making during the key Cuba-related events of the Kennedy presidency and has provided the basis for important recent books.<sup>18</sup> President Kennedy continued Eisenhower's use of a fairly small circle of advisers on Cuba before signing on to the ill-fated exile-invasion plan.<sup>19</sup> Experts on Cuba were notable by their absence as the invasion plan was discussed.<sup>20</sup> Rather, wide deference was given to military and intelligence experts,<sup>21</sup>

though the Department of State offered some political objections.<sup>22</sup> President Kennedy's concern about public opinion centered mostly on his desire for plausible deniability of the U.S. role behind the exile invasion out of concern for domestic, Latin American, and world reaction.<sup>23</sup>

The fourteen hundred or so Cuban exiles who landed on the morning of April 17, 1961, were quickly overwhelmed by the waiting Cuban military. Always something of an open secret, given the difficulty of secretly training several hundred Cuban refugees, the April 15 strike by eight refugee-flown B-26s against the Cuban air force had put the Cubans on full alert. When President Kennedy canceled air support for the early morning landing on April 17, it was clear that the exile invasion force would face a formidable military defense in Cuba. In the end, some two hundred of the invaders were killed and more than twelve hundred were captured by the Cubans in what can only be described as a major foreign policy disaster.

Following the failure at the Bay of Pigs, the Kennedy administration was faced with the task of reconstructing its Cuba policy. Interestingly, the goal of overthrowing Castro was not changed. By August 1961, President Kennedy had approved a new CIA program of covert actions against Cuba. With a budget of more than \$5 million, the CIA was to engage in propaganda activities in Cuba and throughout Latin America, as well as covert activities directed at the economy and continued support for paramilitary forces.<sup>24</sup> Ultimately, the various ideas about covert intelligence and sabotage activities were brought together in November as Operation Mongoose, a project headed by General Edward Lansdale.<sup>25</sup> In 1962 approximately \$50 million was spent in covert operations, including hit-and-run attacks against sugar cane fields, harbors, and power stations.<sup>26</sup> Exiles played a prominent role in the program, but they proved to be quite independent in the field, making unauthorized raids that included attacking Soviet vessels twice.<sup>27</sup>

Congress became increasingly active following the Bay of Pigs and sought to pass a Cuban trade embargo bill. During hearings before a House committee in August 1961, officials from various departments in the executive branch argued that the proposed bill would constrain the president's flexibility to conduct foreign policy and react to changing circumstances.<sup>28</sup> On the Senate side, James Eastland (D-MS), chairman of the Senate Judi-

ciary Committee, “was prepared to use his subcommittee as a rival foreign office to the State Department.” Senators Barry Goldwater (R-AZ) and George Smathers (D-FL) were also prominent Senate voices on the subject of Cuba policy. Senator Smathers, in particular, sought to assume a role “as an expert on U.S.-Cuban relations. . . . There was no senator more often quoted on the Cuba story in 1959–1961 than George Smathers.”<sup>29</sup> Although the activities of Congress put officials from the executive branch in uncomfortable positions at times, the important decisions were clearly still in the hands of Kennedy and his advisers. Successful pressure on the Organization of American States (OAS) to suspend Cuban membership and a ban of all Cuban imports and reexports of U.S. goods from third countries were among the products of administration work in early 1962.

Given that the Cuban missile crisis was essentially a U.S.-Soviet crisis, the decision-making process during that period is tangential to this story. Still, the Kennedy preference for small meetings with select executive branch advisers over full NSC sessions, or consultation with congressional leaders, played itself out most famously during the October 1962 meetings with the Executive Committee of the NSC (Excom).<sup>30</sup> The circle of individuals was kept very small, and secrecy (even in the sense of agreeing not to disclose aspects of the meeting and negotiations in the future) was paramount. There is some evidence of battles within the executive bureaucracy about policy toward Cuba, of course, as information about Soviet military activity on the island became known. Kennedy did apparently use press statements strategically as a means of countering the proponents of more aggressive actions against Castro.<sup>31</sup> The absence of a role for legislative input was a point of resentment for some, including Senator William Fulbright.<sup>32</sup> One way that members of Congress did play a role during the crisis was to serve as unfavorable comparisons—as advocates of invasion less reasonable than the president, Kennedy could compare them to himself in discussions with the Soviet leadership, for example.<sup>33</sup>

There was no relaxation of Cuba policy during President Kennedy’s remaining year in office following the successful outcome of the missile crisis. In fact, Kennedy tightened the diplomatic and economic squeeze on Cuba in 1963 by prohibiting travel to or financial transactions with Cuba by U.S. citizens; in July he ordered all Cuban assets in the United States frozen. The era of presidential dominance over Cuba policy continued.

## Johnson, Cuba, and Communism

President Johnson kept Kennedy's key foreign policy advisers after he rose to the White House following Kennedy's assassination, and he maintained a clear focus on both the island itself and, perhaps more important, on preventing another Cuba from happening. H. W. Brands called that latter objective, "Johnson's fidelphobia."<sup>34</sup> The effort to isolate Cuba remained a high priority. Less than a year after assuming power, the Johnson administration registered a notable success with the July 1964 vote by OAS members to impose economic sanctions and break diplomatic relations with Cuba by a 15-4 vote.<sup>35</sup> From 1964 until the end of Johnson's second term, only Mexico among the countries of Latin America maintained full diplomatic relations with Cuba. Johnson encouraged the rest of the West to likewise isolate Cuba.<sup>36</sup>

Consistent with President Johnson's efforts to isolate Cuba was an emphasis on preventing another Cuba in the hemisphere. Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Thomas Mann reflected that interest in a March 1964 statement that came to be known as the Mann Doctrine. In order to lessen the chances for future communist penetration into Latin America, the United States would henceforth place a higher priority on political stability and economic growth than on democratization. This policy played out in U.S. relations with Brazil in 1964 and the Dominican Republic in 1965. In Brazil, that nation's army did most of the work removing a chief executive who the Johnson administration believed leaned farther to the left than was appropriate. While the extent of U.S. promotion behind the scenes of President Goulart's removal is not entirely clear, we do know that the Johnson administration quickly endorsed the interim military government's legitimacy, sent emergency aid, and declared the change as constitutional, precluding the need for formal diplomatic recognition.<sup>37</sup>

The situation in the Dominican Republic was not as smooth; President Johnson used the U.S. military to block the ascension of a potential left of center government in 1965. To guarantee public support in the United States for the invasion, Johnson promoted the idea that Castro was behind the troublesome developments that led to U.S. intervention. In May 1965, well before the full-scale invasion of the Dominican Republic,

Johnson noted that the United States would use “every resource at our command to prevent the establishment of another Cuba in the hemisphere.”<sup>38</sup>

The Johnson administration officials initially moved away from some of their predecessor’s more controversial policies, such as assassination attempts on Castro and CIA-sponsored sabotage inside Cuba—efforts they increasingly saw as ineffective. In practice, though, the administration continued some operations against the sugar crop in Cuba, as well as attempts to sabotage products destined for Cuba from overseas ports.<sup>39</sup> With neither an overt nor covert military solution on the agenda, President Johnson made tightening, widening, and enforcing the economic sanctions against Cuba the focus of his policy.

During the early Vietnam years, Congress mostly supported Johnson’s foreign policy decisions. Critiques from legislators were most notable for their exceptionalism. Senator Fulbright stepped up his criticism of U.S.-Cuba policy. The chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee called for policy change in a famous “Old Myths and New Realities” speech in early 1964. He argued that U.S. efforts to overthrow and isolate Castro had failed and that the United States should realize that Castro was a “distasteful nuisance but not an intolerable danger.”<sup>40</sup> The other real challenge to the president was from lawmakers who sought to strengthen the economic sanctions against Cuba and countries that traded with it in ways that the White House opposed because the steps would limit President Johnson’s flexibility in relations with allies.<sup>41</sup> In general, Congress deferred to and supported Johnson’s Cuba policy.

With the exception of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), which had played a role in foreign policy toward the Middle East since the 1950s, interest groups were not central foreign policy players during Johnson’s presidency. An increase in activism by a variety of interest groups on both domestic and foreign issues in the mid-1960s, however, was beginning to affect the policy-making process. The civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements were the vanguard of this new mobilization, but soon a wide array of groups followed.<sup>42</sup>

The principal foreign policy crisis that the Johnson administration dealt with in relation to Cuba involved migration.<sup>43</sup> In October 1965, about three thousand Cubans left the island from Camarioca in the initial “boat-lift” to the United States. While there is some evidence that the Florida

congressional delegation encouraged the Johnson administration to consider economic and social costs on the state as it developed a response,<sup>44</sup> policy was made by an ad hoc task force in the executive branch. The policy it formulated, including the beginning of the Freedom Flights program in early November 1965 (some 250,000 Cubans would come to the United States under the auspices of the program by 1971), was accepted in large part uncritically by Congress.<sup>45</sup> In 1966, President Johnson signed the Cuban Adjustment Act that allowed more than 100,000 Cubans in the United States to apply for permanent residence. The president chose to enact this policy through the attorney general's authority on immigration matters, rather than seek a bill from a Congress that would have likely been fully supportive, keeping control over Cuba policy inside the executive branch.<sup>46</sup>

## Nixon and Cuba

Regardless of the number of Third World hot spots, neither President Nixon nor his chief foreign policy adviser, Henry Kissinger, was predisposed to focus on north-south relations. Rather, their preference was to work with the Great Powers—both in the East and West.<sup>47</sup> Nixon and Kissinger saw Latin America as a region of lesser importance that therefore should be ignored when possible and coerced when necessary. That sort of sentiment would allow Kissinger to famously note that just because the Chileans voted for Socialist Salvador Allende they should not have to live with the consequences. Kissinger was brutally honest in conceding that he neither knew very much about Latin America nor worried about that lack of information.<sup>48</sup> President Nixon himself had a number of personal experiences and relationships that made it hard for him to ignore the region, whatever his own East-West predisposition may have been. A disastrous trip through South America as vice president in the 1950s, the role Cuba played in the 1960 presidential election he had lost, and even his close friend, Cuban American Bebe Rebozo, all made him sensitive to the presence of left-wing movements in Latin America.

The Nixon administration undertook a review of U.S.-Cuba policy relatively early on. Nixon apparently told an adviser about Castro: "There'll

be no change toward that bastard while I'm President." Both Nixon and Kissinger supported a renewal of covert operations against Castro.<sup>49</sup> Nixon and his advisers generally saw Cuba as the same kind of problem as did previous administrations. As the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Robert Hurwitch told Congress in July 1969, "The Cuban government has not abandoned nor renounced its policies of engaging in subversion in the hemisphere. With respect to Cuba's military ties with the Soviet Union, we found even less reason to alter our policy toward Cuba."<sup>50</sup>

1970 was a critical year for U.S.-Latin American relations. Socialist Salvador Allende was elected president in Chile, and intelligence suggested that the Soviets were building a submarine base in Cuba. The Chilean issue was addressed through covert action. What to do about the construction at Cienfuegos in Cuba was more complicated. Kissinger was very angry about the construction and what it potentially represented—a large increase in the strategic capability of the Soviet nuclear fleet in the Western Hemisphere.<sup>51</sup> President Nixon, however, did not wish this to develop into a crisis that would endanger détente with the Soviets.<sup>52</sup> While the issue was settled without a major crisis and by most accounts satisfactorily for U.S. interests, it is an important case here because the policy-making dynamics over the issue of Cienfuegos appear in retrospect to signal an important shift in the nature of U.S. foreign policy making that would come to greater fruition later.

On September 9, 1970, intelligence information indicated that a Soviet flotilla, including a ship carrying two barges presumed to be for servicing nuclear subs, had arrived at Cienfuegos. Within a week, U-2 spy planes revealed construction activity at the site. CIA Director Richard Helms updated Kissinger on September 18 following an unrelated meeting. Kissinger was particularly taken with the photos of a soccer field near the Cienfuegos harbor and argued that the fact that Cubans play baseball not soccer was in itself conclusive evidence that the Soviets were constructing some sort of naval facility in the area. "Those soccer fields could mean war," he later told Nixon's Chief of Staff, H. R. "Bob" Haldeman.<sup>53</sup> Kissinger was perhaps wrong about Cuban interest in soccer, but he was right about the construction of some sort of submarine base on the southern coast of the island.

The executive branch was divided about how to respond. Nixon and the State Department did not want a public “crisis” with the Soviets and believed that the issue could be resolved in quiet negotiations. Kissinger, the Defense Department, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) believed that the Soviet construction was a serious threat that demanded an aggressive response. Overarching all of this, policy makers knew that if the information about Soviet activity in Cuba were to enter the public arena, there was the distinct possibility that public outrage would follow and a crisis would be unavoidable. On September 16, two days before he saw the photographs of the soccer fields, Kissinger commented to *New York Times* columnist C. L. Sulzberger about “Soviet horsing around in Cuba.”<sup>54</sup> On September 25, Sulzberger broke the news, noting the appearance of a naval installation under construction in Cienfuegos, to serve Soviet submarines.<sup>55</sup> But the initial, and presumably subsequent, “leaks” from Kissinger served a purpose. As a Kissinger biographer argued, “faced with a President who would not take the tough road, Kissinger treated him like any other bureaucratic enemy, and leaked to the press.”<sup>56</sup>

After Sulzberger’s column, a sense of at least mild urgency emerged in Congress and in the public at large. Articles appeared in newspapers almost daily, and Nixon’s preferred approach of quiet diplomacy became a politically unacceptable strategy. In Congress, Florida Democrat Dante Fascell used his position as chair of a House subcommittee to call for a quick U.S. response, and Senator Frank Church (D-ID) announced that the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Western Hemispheric Affairs would hold a closed hearing to review the “potentially serious development” in Cuba.<sup>57</sup> For a few weeks the Nixon administration was under attack from two sides. Some in Congress and the media demanded a response to the serious threat posed by the Cienfuegos “crisis”; others skeptically charged Nixon with trying to get political benefits out of a relatively insignificant development.<sup>58</sup>

In the end, as Nixon wrote in his memoirs, “After some face-saving delays, the Soviets abandoned Cienfuegos.”<sup>59</sup> Nixon believed that this was a foreign policy success. It was also, however, an example of the strategic use of information leaked to the public by an important player in the decision-making circle in order to shift the terms of debate. Certainly, the circle of decision makers remained small during Cienfuegos, but here we

see new actors, especially Congress, acting in new arenas, in the public eye, entering the Cuba policy-making picture.

Even without the prompt of construction at Cienfuegos, Congress was willing to view Cuba within a cold war context that framed the Cuba question not in terms of whether the island nation should be isolated by the United States, but rather how aggressively the executive and legislature should be in extending the embargo. Generally, Nixon's and Kissinger's cold war rhetoric resonated in a Congress where voices such as those of Dante Fascell advocated even more aggressive action against communist Cuba. As Nixon's first term wore on, though, some Democrats began to question Cuba policy. Ted Kennedy (D-MA) was a prominent voice, noting the administration's "outdated and unrealistic" approach. And in a precursor to the debate almost three decades later, Kennedy suggested that treating China and Cuba as analogous cases was appropriate, given that recent overture by President Nixon toward communist China.<sup>60</sup>

During Nixon's shortened second term, congressional challenges to Cuba policy picked up steam. In 1971 and 1972, several senators, including William Fulbright (D-AR) and Charlie Mathias (R-MD), made speeches, introduced resolutions, and generally challenged the administration's policy on Cuba. The "Wednesday Group," a small block of moderate and liberal Republican members of the House, even recommended that the economic blockade of Cuba be lifted.<sup>61</sup> By the mid-1970s, members of Congress sometimes traveled to Cuba to personally assess U.S. policy. In 1974, Senators Claiborne Pell (D-RI) and Jacob Javits (R-NY) visited the island; the following year, during the Ford presidency, Charles Whalen (R-OH) was the first House member known to have traveled to postrevolution Cuba.<sup>62</sup> Philip Brenner suggests that the dynamic between the executive and the legislature over the Cuba issue at the time was characterized by examples of independent activity on the part of particular members of Congress within the context of an executive who mixed anti-Cuban rhetoric with just enough support for the activities of antiembargo legislators at key junctures.<sup>63</sup>

Near the end of the Nixon presidency, Secretary of State Kissinger began a process aimed at the potential normalization of relations with Cuba. In June 1974, Kissinger approved a trip by staff members from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee; he also sent a message to Castro by

way of U.S. journalists; and he appointed an advocate of normalization, William D. Rogers, to the position of Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs.<sup>64</sup> The combination of public and private moves by Kissinger suggested that an opening to Cuba might follow the China opening; Cuban activity in Africa would lead President Ford to reconsider such a move. While U.S. policy toward Cuba remained essentially the same when Nixon left office as it had been when he arrived, it was in this period that new dynamics around Cuba policy began to emerge, dynamics that would take greater hold later.

### Ford, Carter, and Castro

President Nixon's resignation in August 1974 elevated Vice President Gerald R. Ford to the presidency at a potentially favorable time for normalizing U.S.-Cuban relations. The planning process for secret talks in Washington and New York between U.S. and Cuban officials was well underway. When those talks began in November 1974, the U.S. side was represented by William Rogers, assistant secretary of state, and Lawrence Eagleburger, assistant to the secretary of state—two reasonably high ranking officials who were thought to be sympathetic to normalization. In the post-Vietnam Congress, some conservatives such as Senator Bennett Johnston (D-LA) and Representative John Breaux (D-LA), seeing the potential economic benefits for their state in the event of a trade opening, joined liberal voices interested in policy change. Johnston and Breaux visited Cuba in November 1974 and returned touting the potential market for Louisiana-grown rice.<sup>65</sup> Dante Fascell (D-FL) and his House allies presented a formidable obstacle to significant policy change, although an organizational change in the House committee structure diluted his influence somewhat. The Foreign Affairs Committee, chaired by Fascell, was renamed the Committee on International Relations, and the new subcommittees were based on function rather than geography. The embargo fell under the International Trade and Commerce Subcommittee. Its chairman, Jonathan Bingham (D-NY), supported revoking the president's authority to continue the embargo.<sup>66</sup> In the international arena, Nixon's opening to China and moves toward détente with the Soviets seemed a

favorable background, if not a precedent, for President Ford should he want to move in a similar direction on Cuba. And in July 1975, the OAS voted to lift the organization's collective sanctions against Cuba.<sup>67</sup>

Following the OAS vote Ford modified the embargo in several ways and announced his intentions to negotiate with the Cuban government on the question of normalized relations.<sup>68</sup> Changes to the embargo included ending the ban on trade by third-country subsidiaries, as long as goods were "nonstrategic" and were produced with minimal U.S. components; allowing third-country ships to bunker at U.S. ports; and the elimination of the prohibition of foreign aid to countries whose ships or planes transported goods to or from Cuba.<sup>69</sup>

Relations with Cuba went steadily downhill from this high point at the end of summer in 1975, primarily because of Castro's decision to deploy several thousand Cuban troops to Angola to bolster the forces of the MPLA, or Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola, which were the most Marxist forces involved in the Angolan civil war. The United States gave covert assistance to the UNITA (National Union for Total Independence) forces in the civil war. Just before Christmas of 1975, Ford announced that the possibility of improving U.S.-Cuban relations had been eliminated by the Cuban military involvement in Africa, as well as support for the Puerto Rican independence movement.<sup>70</sup> Within forty-eight hours, Castro vowed continued support for both movements.<sup>71</sup> Even though Kissinger exhorted Congress to take action against Cuba for its African adventures, Congress largely dismissed such rhetoric and voted to ban covert military aid to Angola in January 1976 over the appeals of the president and the secretary of state. As Ambrose notes, this action was an "example of Congress taking charge of foreign policy in a way unthinkable" in previous administrations.<sup>72</sup> Congress and the president were largely silent on Cuba policy the rest of the year. By the time President Carter took office in 1977, congressional interest in changing course on Cuba had all but disappeared, and in general the momentum seemed to have shifted away from any openings.

When President Jimmy Carter took office, he seemed intent on using his position to shift direction on a number of foreign policy issues. The new chief executive moved quickly to put his own imprint on U.S. policy toward Latin America, particularly in relations with Panama and Cuba.

In the case of Panama, Carter struggled to convince Congress (and the public) that returning the Canal was the right thing to do. While less sure of public sentiment with regard to Cuba policy, the Carter administration did fear a political backlash if talks with that country received too much publicity.<sup>73</sup> Within the administration, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance seemed to favor normalizing relations, while National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski had strong reservations.<sup>74</sup>

During Carter's first year as president he made a series of moves aimed at undoing his predecessors' policies. In March Carter lifted the restrictions on travel to Cuba by U.S. citizens and allowed them to spend up to \$100 on Cuban goods during any single visit. A month later, a fishing rights and maritime boundaries agreement was signed. Finally "interests sections" were opened in Washington and Havana to serve functions typically undertaken by ambassadors and embassies. The NSC also discontinued its blacklisting of foreign ships engaged in Cuba trade. These moves were significant enough that Wayne Smith, director of the Office of Cuban Affairs in the State Department, assumed that the president would shortly proceed in the near future to end the embargo entirely.<sup>75</sup>

There were favorable signs of ending the embargo coming from Capitol Hill as well. In 1977 a basketball team from South Dakota traveled to the island, accompanied by the state's senators, George McGovern and James Abourezk. Upon their return, the legislators argued for ending at least the embargo on food and medicine. President Carter offered some support, suggesting that he would not oppose congressional movement in that direction.<sup>76</sup> Other positive signs that same year included a visit to Cuba by Senate Foreign Relations Chairman Frank Church, and hints from U.S. businesses that they would benefit from doing business in Cuba.<sup>77</sup>

Cuba's move into Ethiopia in 1978 threatened to halt the momentum. Brzezinski, dubious about the diplomatic openings, used the military adventure to great effect in the struggle between the NSC and State. While the president was still the controlling actor in foreign policy making, others—inside and outside the executive—attempted to influence policy in increasingly public ways. Brzezinski, for example, described in the press only as a "high ranking administration official," promoted the view that Cubans were expanding their military presence in Cuba. Reminiscent of Kissinger's leaks in 1970, he thus put the administration in a position of

being essentially “trapped by its own rhetoric.”<sup>78</sup> Secret administration negotiations with Cuba were subverted by the public escalation of words condemning the Soviet, and Cuban, role in Africa.

The domestic political climate surrounding the Panama Canal Treaty negotiations also shrunk Carter’s space to operate on Cuba. Carter had prioritized the Panama Canal and used considerable political capital taking the issue to the U.S. public and Congress. By the time he gained a difficult victory on a 68–32 vote in April 1978, Carter was on the defensive in the face of conservative attacks about his administration’s concessions and general weakness in foreign relations. Critics argued that not only were there Cuban soldiers threatening U.S. interests in Africa, but the Soviet military was offering an unanswered challenge to the United States in Cuba itself. Allegations were focused on the arrival of twenty-three Soviet MiG fighter-bombers in 1978, and in the following year, a combat brigade.<sup>79</sup>

The “discovery” of a Soviet military brigade in the summer of 1979, whose existence had been known to U.S. officials as far back as 1963, occurred at a difficult time politically for the Carter administration. A spring coup in Grenada and the Nicaraguan Sandinista success in July of that same year suggested that Latin America might be vulnerable to movements from the Left. A difficult battle for the ratification of SALT II in Congress, and the prospect of a tough right-wing Republican challenge in the 1980 presidential elections, complicated the political dynamic even further.<sup>80</sup>

Carter lost control of the Soviet brigade story. Senator Richard Stone (D-FL) went public with the story at a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on July 17. With assurances from CIA Director Stansfield Turner and Secretary of Defense Harold Brown at the hearing that nothing new had been found in Cuba, Senator Church (D-ID) went on record with a statement later in the day that no significant Soviet military activity was taking place on the Caribbean island.<sup>81</sup> Still, the intelligence community’s monitoring of military exercises in Cuba the following month led to a CIA report confirming that the Soviet troops in Cuba constituted a combat brigade.<sup>82</sup> That report was then leaked into media hands.<sup>83</sup> When Senator Church called a news conference to announce the combat brigade, a foreign policy crisis emerged almost entirely out of incomplete intelligence reports, politically sensitive legislators, and relatively obscure Wash-

ington media reports. The president was on the sidelines as the story played out in a very public way.

Electoral considerations entered into Senator Church's decision to go public. A liberal Democrat who had voted for the Panama Canal treaty, running in conservative Idaho, Church was clearly vulnerable to a 1980 challenge.<sup>84</sup> In fact an ad running against him showed him in Cuba smoking cigars with Castro.<sup>85</sup> The move by Senator Stone (D-FL) to go public with information about the brigade also suggests the emerging role of the Cuban exile community in Florida as a domestic political factor shaping the dispute not just over the brigade, but over U.S. policy toward Cuba more generally. Finally, in September, the Carter administration seized the agenda back from Congress and the exiles by announcing the discovery of information the U.S. government had had for approximately seventeen years.<sup>86</sup>

Although this crisis ended anticlimactically,<sup>87</sup> a number of trends in the way U.S.-Cuba policy was made were becoming apparent. Members of Congress were becoming more assertive on issues of foreign policy. The Cuban exile community, largely absent from policy circles since the Bay of Pigs, began to emerge as a political force as parts of the exile community recognized that they needed to rethink their strategy from covert forceful acts against Castro (and each other) toward Washington lobbying.<sup>88</sup> And the link between the U.S. and Cuban governments atrophied. In fact, the failure of the United States to protest terrorist acts against Cuba and unwillingness to discuss immigration questions played a role in the subsequent Mariel boatlift crisis of 1980.<sup>89</sup>

As boats began to leave from the port at Mariel in late April, it quickly became apparent that a major problem was at hand. During the first week of exodus, April 21–27, the 6,053 departing Cubans represented a larger number than the total who left during a 1965 boatlift from Camarioca; by the second week more than 1,000 people a day were leaving. While the Carter administration was certainly distracted at the time by the Iran hostage situation among other things, their decision-making process was clearly flawed. During an election year, a classically intermestic issue (that is, an issue with both domestic and international political implications) such as immigration posed a real challenge. In dealing with the international

component—negotiations with Cuba—the NSC sought to take control of the policy and in doing so effectively excluded the “Cuba experts” from the process.<sup>90</sup> Domestically, the president faced serious economic problems and was confronted by legislators and the public, including those who sought to link the question of the Cuban exodus with Haitian refugees. Ultimately, the boatlift ended, but not before more than 100,000 *Marielitos* had reached U.S. shores.

By late spring of 1980, the list of issues other than Mariel that President Carter had to answer for in order to be reelected—from energy prices and an economic slowdown (the national malaise) to the hostages in Iran and the flurry of setbacks in Afghanistan and Nicaragua—had grown so long that Cuba may not have mattered. But in the Soviet brigade and Mariel crises, we do see a turning point in the foreign policy-making process. It was during the Carter administration that actors began to mobilize who would become increasingly significant players in the future. Congress became more assertive, and Cuban American groups with ties to the Reagan campaign began to form what would become the powerful Cuban American National Foundation. Finally, the effort to take unsettled policy debates to the public’s ears, as CNN began to broadcast, hinted at the more public nature foreign policy making would take in the near future. It would be left for the winner in that presidential election year, Ronald Reagan, to make his own mark in broadening the scope and nature of foreign policy making even further in the 1980s.

The people and the governments of the United States and Cuba have been tied together in a complicated political history. As the Eisenhower administration put the economic embargo of Cuba into place and successive administrations followed suit, the politics that shaped American policy toward the island started to become more complicated as well. As the 1980s began, a new era of the politics of U.S.-Cuba policy was born, an era of executive dominance partnered with new ethnic interest group activism. The politics of Cuba policy would never again be as simple as they were during the Eisenhower years.