

HARVARD

MAGAZINE



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On the cover: Memorial Hall's restored tower
Photograph by Jim Harrison



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DAVID WIRBACH

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Your Friend, Fidel

A letter from Cuba

Jorge I. Domínguez, Dillon professor of international affairs and director of the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard University, discovered this letter one day in December 2022, as he wandered through the National Archives in Washington, D.C. He reports some doubt about its authenticity, but believes Cuban president Fidel Castro could have imagined it.

To: Uncle Sam

From: Fidel Castro

26 July 2000

As I prepare to outwit the tenth U.S. President who might attempt to overthrow my government in years to come, today, on the forty-seventh anniversary of my successful revolutionary movement, I owe you thanks.

You were enormously helpful to me at so many points in my career as a revolutionary that I hardly know where to start. It was just brilliant to send Batista-hugging, photo-op loving, canasta-playing ambassadors to Cuba in the 1950s to help remind the Cuban people of the connection between the U.S. government and local dictatorship. Tears of gratitude come to my eyes when I recall your dispatch of a helpless exile brigade to the Bay of Pigs in April 1961. I crushed them in 72 hours, rounded up tens of thousands of members of the domestic opposition, and succeeded in persuading the Soviet Union that you were a real, albeit pathetic, enemy. I remain eternally grateful that you persist in occupying the naval base at Guantánamo. You thus remind Cubans of a legacy of imperialism that today's schoolchildren find difficult to believe: a treaty without a termination date, requiring just a few thousand dollars in annual payment for the base—a check I have refused to cash since 1960. To be sure, I reserve a warm spot in my heart for the Central Intelligence Agency, which over the years took charge of the Bay of Pigs exile brigade, hired organized-crime killers, sent poison cigars, and even attempted a scheme to depilate my beard. The CIA helped to build me up as David facing Goliath and contributed to my aura of invincibility. Yet nothing compares to your generosity during the 1990s. Every time I was down, *really down*, you came to my rescue.

Remember how grim it once was for a graybeard revolutionary like me. In 1989, one after another of the communist regimes of central and eastern Europe collapsed. In 1990, the Soviet Union stopped subsidizing my economy and, in 1991, the USSR itself collapsed. Bumper-stickers appeared in Miami's Little Havana: "Christmas in Havana," they proclaimed smugly. The Cuban econ-

omy nosedived. Gross domestic product dropped by well over one-third from 1990 to 1993. From 1989 to 1993, the value of imports fell by three-quarters and the value of exports fell by two-thirds. The budget deficit by 1993 reached one-third of gross domestic product. Inflation took off; the value of the peso tumbled. The standard of living of ordinary Cubans fell drastically. Food had to be rationed dramatically. Mass public transportation came to a virtual standstill. Cubans had to walk to work or ride a bicycle. Many simply stopped going to their workplaces and began to work illegally. Imagine—breaking the law in Fidel Castro's Cuba and getting away with it had been unthinkable for decades.

At this worst moment for our cause, you reactivated your long-term policy to smash my government. We have now turned the corner on most of these economic issues. We have done so proudly—and alone. Our main resource was political—our commitment and will to resist. And you made it much easier to per-



Havana: Castro at a rally for Elián González, January 25, 2000.

suade many Cubans, and my own team, that we had no choice but to resist successfully your efforts to overthrow us.

For me, personally, the early 1990s felt like the end. It was certainly much less fun than during the Cold War. From 1975 to 1990, I sent more than 300,000 troops on overseas military missions, with 30,000 to 50,000 Cuban troops deployed overseas during any given year in that time span. Cuban troops won the three wars they went to fight on African soil (twice in Angola, once in Ethiopia)—you lost badly in Vietnam, but I won't rub it in. Cuba's was the only communist government capable of deploying significant military forces across the oceans and achieving its objectives on the battlefield. It was especially fun to deploy tens of thousands of Cuban troops to victory in Angola in 1987 while Reagan slept. Then, suddenly, between 1989 and 1992 I had to repatriate all my troops and even stop supporting revolutionary movements overseas because I no longer had the Soviet Union as my "insurance policy" against you. And when I attended international conferences of heads of state, everyone kept asking me about democratization.



DAVID MURBACH

Cienfuegos Botanical Garden has deep Harvard roots.

Harvard and Havana

SINCE FIDEL CASTRO TOOK POWER, direct travel and communications between the United States and Cuba have been proscribed. But academic and cultural exchanges have been sustained. Those channels are now widening, with the result that the presence of Harvard scholars and students in Cuba, and of Cubans at Harvard, is no longer rare.

Some of this traffic reflects historic relationships. Following the Spanish-American War, the U.S. military governor of the island, Leonard Wood, M.D. 1884—former commander of the "Rough Riders"—and Harvard president Charles William Eliot arranged for 1,283 Cuban teachers to visit the University in the summer of 1900, to be trained in the workings of American-style education. Eliot, a devoted

summer resident of Maine, that year stayed in Cambridge to oversee the visitors' studies, and put up four of them in his own home. The Cienfuegos Botanical Garden—until 1961 the Harvard Botanical Garden, and before that the Atkins Institute for Tropical Research—was founded at the turn of the century as a research center for the sugarcane industry. In time, it evolved into the tropical adjunct of the Arnold Arboretum, and served for decades as an important center of botanical studies.

Harvardians have also maintained a presence on the island individually. For example, Richard Levins, Rock professor of population sciences at the School of Public Health, has worked since the mid 1960s as an adviser to the Cuban government on issues in agriculture, ecology, and public health. In 1999 he was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Havana.

Under the auspices of the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies (supported by the MacArthur Foundation), faculty and student exchanges with Cuba have become much more frequent. The Winter 2000 issue of the center's newsletter, *DRCLAS News*, focuses on Cuba. It contains policy analyses and reports by Harvard faculty members and graduate students and by guest scholars, including several articles on the Harvard-Havana connection historically and today. The texts may be found on-line at www.fas.harvard.edu/~drclas/publications/newsletter/index.htm; to obtain a copy of the issue, which contains many photographs of contemporary Cuban life, contact the center at drclas@fas.harvard.edu or 61 Kirkland Street, Cambridge 02138.

That's when you came to my rescue. In October 1992, the U.S. Congress enacted the so-called Cuban Democracy Act, sponsored by then U.S. Representative Robert Torricelli, a New Jersey Democrat. Both Bill Clinton and George Bush had endorsed the bill. The new law prohibited U.S. subsidiaries in third countries from trading with Cuba and it tightened other aspects of U.S. sanctions on Cuba. Within Cuba, this brought hardship to people because food was our main import from U.S. subsidiaries in third countries. For me, however, it was a political godsend. Every time someone complained about food shortages, I could reply, "Courtesy of Uncle Sam." Just some days later, for the first time ever, Cuba gained United Nations General Assembly approval of a resolution condemning the U.S. trade embargo. Our isolation had deepened dangerously in the early 1990s, but your 1992 law helped me break out of it because of your attempt to extend the reach of U.S. law well beyond your territorial jurisdiction.

Ah, but genius knows no bounds, and you came through for me once again in March 1996 with the enactment of the so-called Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act, sponsored by two

Republicans, Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina and Representative Dan Burton of Indiana. The law authorizes U.S. citizens and firms to sue in U.S. federal courts those international firms from Canada, the United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, Israel, and other countries that have invested in Cuba. Their offense is that they have invested in properties expropriated decades ago by the revolutionary government. The Helms-Burton Act demands restitution or compensation for the expropriated property.

You have no idea how helpful this law has been. I got it translated into Spanish. Long passages have been read over and over on the Cuban broadcast mass media, printed in the press, and discussed at the endless meetings I relish so much. Now I can say, "You don't need to believe me. Just read the U.S. law. The United States claims to want democracy in Cuba. What it really wants is property." You successfully stimulated every fear lurking in the bones of every Cuban—the fear that the U.S. government and its Cuban-exile allies really want revenge and recompense, turning the clock back to a Cuba long ago buried. I cannot believe my luck every time I read Helms-Burton's Section 206 (6). It defines democracy—not just a U.S. policy objective, not just a plausibly desirable outcome, but the very heart and soul of the definition of democracy—as "a government which...has made demonstrable progress in returning to United States citizens...property taken by the Cuban Government from such citizens and entities on or after January 1, 1959, or providing full compensation for such property." I love the date you chose. It means that you are ready to protect Batista's corrupt cronies on behalf of democracy in Cuba!

~THE EDITORS

The law was wonderfully helpful in getting politically wavering Cubans to eschew support for those who would dump me. And it was, if you can believe it, even more helpful internationally. For example, at the UN General Assembly, the 1992 vote condemning your economic sanctions on my government carried with 59 in favor, 3 against, and 71 abstaining. But in the wake of the enactment of Helms-Burton, 143 voted to condemn your policy, 3 voted against, and only 17 abstained. Look at your NATO allies or Latin American and Caribbean countries: you will find their diplomats shaking hands with mine, not yours.

The Canadians went apoplectic over Helms-Burton, and they have become among our best international economic partners. We even get foreign aid from them. The European Union filed suit with the World Trade Organization, arguing that Helms-Burton broke international trade law as well as being contrary to longstanding U.S. opposition to secondary trade embargoes. The English-speaking Caribbean defied your policies toward Cuba, welcoming us in many and increasingly complex associations even at the risk that you would retaliate against them. Alas, we even have excellent relations with Grenada, provide it with scholarships for its bright students, and have welcomed its prime minister to Havana. (Remember Grenada? You invaded it in 1983 to kick out the Cubans, but you seem to have forgotten it.)

I should even be grateful for what you did *not* do. A dozen years ago, opposition to Noriega in Panama and activism in

Beijing around the Tiananmen Square protests were nurtured internationally through fax machines. But you forbid the export of fax machines to Cuba. Technology has advanced and you, thoughtfully, forbid the export of modems and all such communications equipment to Cuba. Honestly, I could not censor international information to keep it away from the Cuban people without your systematic, flawless, stalwart support. On behalf of my overworked officers at State Security, thank you, thank you.

As you know, some pesky economists have from time to time wondered about the opportunity of our joining the international financial institutions as one way to get out of the decade-long economic crisis that has overwhelmed Cuba. You saved me from this headache, too. There is no greater enemy of my economic policy design than the International Monetary Fund. You will know

"I can tell parents—and Cuba is full of parents—that U.S. policy strikes at the heart of the Cuban family."



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that I *have* been defeated when Cuba joins the IMF. I could have told these economists that they get it all wrong. "Reform communism" is an oxymoron. That's what Gorbachev never understood. Only the North Koreans and we seem to realize it. In any event, you saved me the argument because Helms-Burton commits you to opposing Cuba's admission to international financial institutions, and we remain mercifully beyond IMF clutches.

Keep kidnapping six-year-old boys because I always win in those cases. I win if you keep the kids because I can tell their parents—and Cuba is full of parents—that U.S. policy strikes at



ON/PHOTOBIS

Little Havana: A fervent rally about Elián González in Miami, March 29, 2000. At sea: Refugees on a makeshift raft between Cuba and Key West, August 24, 1994.

the heart of the Cuban family. And I win if you return the kids because I am the best guarantee of fairness to Cubans in upholding the values they hold dear.

And, please, make sure to prohibit the Harvard Alumni Association from sponsoring tours of Cuba. I have enough Canadians and Swedes who come for the

beaches and sunshine. In fact, in 1999 Cuba received 1.6 million tourists, becoming one of the prime tourism destinations in the Caribbean. I want lots of tourists, so long as all they ask for is sunscreen, not political change. ▽

Jorge I. Domínguez, a former president of the Latin American Studies Association, is the author of Democratic Politics in Latin America and the Caribbean (1998); his article "U.S.-Latin American Relations during the Cold War and Its Aftermath" appeared in The United States and Latin America: The New Agenda (1999), a joint publication of the Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies at Harvard and the Institute of Latin American Studies at the University of London. Born in Cuba, he came to this country as a teenager; his most recent visit to the island took place in March as part of a group from the Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities.