

Examining the Carter Administration's Diplomatic Approach to Normalizing Relations with Cuba, March-November 1977

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In May of 1978 President Jimmy Carter made a public statement in which he said “There is no possibility that we would see any substantial, further improvement in our relationship with Cuba as long as [Castro is] committed to this military intrusion into the international affairs of the African people.”¹ The statement is telling in several ways and summarizes the Carter administration's approach to normalizing relations with Cuba beginning in March of 1977 and continuing in earnest until mid-1978, and then with sporadic moves until the conclusion of his administration in 1980. In one aspect of the statement is illustrated the various and often disparate opinions of administration officials in linking efforts to normalize relations with Cuba to other international situations. It also illustrates the victory of Carter administration officials who saw the Cold War in terms of East-West relations. In another it is a blatant misrepresentation of Cuban foreign policy to the American public. The Carter administration's inability to successfully normalize relations with Cuba is a multifaceted and multisided story, tempered by an international context where such a process was of little significance – and worth putting on a back burner - in comparison to efforts to ratify the SALT II treaty, not to mention the “taboo” nature – the opinion supposedly held by the American public – of the US-Cuban relationship since the complete break in diplomatic relations in 1961. The ultimate breakdown in normalization attempts between the two countries can be attributed to many factors, including disparate approaches within Carter's administration, congressional input stemming from multiple interests such as business and foreign policy,

¹ Lars Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 319.

arguably Cuba's relatively few reciprocal gestures in the process, as well the general situation in which the Soviet Union and the United States moved toward a breakdown in détente. Inherent in these factors are a multitude of considerations and specific events. It would be misguided to attempt to pinpoint one specific or even overarching impetus toward the breakdown of normalization discussions between the US and Cuba. However, discussed here is one aspect - which is perhaps one of the most glaring causes of the breakdown in normalization attempts – the Carter administration's inability to effectively mold its foreign policy to take into consideration, as Secretary of State Cyrus Vance said in his memoir, "new forces and actors [that had] appeared in areas of the world that had been on the periphery [before the 1960s]. [Foreign policy] required a broader American conception of U.S. security interests and of the scope of our foreign policy than merely the U.S.-Soviet or the East-West geopolitical competition."² While Carter sought to bring a fresh mandate to his foreign policy with an emphasis on human rights, and certainly took steps, what is apparent about his administration is that this policy was applied subjectively on the geopolitical stage and according to an increasingly backward step in approaching third world issues from a narrow "East-West" perspective.

The period between March 1977 and June 1978 marks the most active attempts of the Carter administration to seek normalization of relations with Cuba, though moves would be made on both sides throughout the remainder of the administration and culminating in the Mariel crisis of 1980. In fact, in the end, this period saw critical steps to improvement in relations that would be reversed during the Reagan administration and in relation to international developments in the 1980s. It is crucial to lay a foundation for

² Cyrus Vance, *Hard Choices: Critical Years in America's Foreign Policy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 23.

understanding the events of this time period by examining Carter's approach to foreign policy when he came into office, as well as the general approach to normalizing relations various administration officials took. Carter, as acknowledged by both Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski in their memoirs, initially knew little about foreign policy, but recorded in his diary,

My inclination is to alleviate tension around the world, including disharmonies between our country and those with whom we have no official diplomatic relationships, like China, North Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Cuba, and I'll be moving in this direction. I think the country's ready for it, although in some instances like Cuba it's going to be quite controversial to do so.³

Carter's initial vision reflects a generally progressive attitude in continuation from the end of the previous administration's foreign policy initiatives, whereby under Kissinger attempts were made to take into account the growing influence of third world countries in the geopolitical arena.⁴ However, Carter's foreign policy tactics ultimately faltered in the post-Vietnam and Watergate era, a period marked by increasing distrust of the government by the American public. A pollster once told Carter, "More people believe you to be ineffective than effective, wishy washy than decisive, not in control than in control."⁵ US policy toward Cuba was kept in relative secrecy – as illustrated by the frequently utilized term "secret history" to describe this particular initiative – and would be heavily influenced by Carter and Brzezinski's increasingly hardline, East-West view of relations with the Soviet Union. Indeed, inherent in Carter's approach to the Soviet Union are aspects that would also seemingly complicate his stance on Cuba,

³ Jimmy Carter, *White House Diary* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 27.

⁴ Vance, 23.

⁵ Miller Center, "American President: Jimmy Carter," <http://millercenter.org/president/carter/essays/biography/8>.

especially in light of his relations with other socialist countries such as China. Indeed, key players from his administration were parallel in their assessments of his communication ability in memoirs. Brzezinski wrote that Carter “could overstate what he wanted to say quite grossly and pay a high political price for it.”⁶ Wayne S. Smith, the Department of State’s Cuba expert and eventually Head of the US Interests Section in Havana, wrote that early on “the president [...] quickly displayed the penchant for contradictory signals and policy incoherence that came to characterize his presidency—and eventually led to its failure.”⁷ Secretary of State Cyrus Vance wrote about the time, “Our recent experience had shown that without a broad base of support in the Senate and the House and among the American people, policies were vulnerable to misunderstanding, public disillusionment, and repudiation.”⁸ Indeed, in summary Carter, in his thrust for human rights in foreign policy dealings “tapped the vein of idealism that has always informed U.S. internationalism, but failed to locate a possible connection between attitude toward human rights and security.”⁹ Eventually normalization with Cuba would be the victim of attempts to placate congress to pass the SALT II treaty in the administration’s increasingly hard line stance that Cuba was a Soviet puppet. Some scholars believe that the American public simply could not comprehend any foreign policy strategy outside the one it had known for decades, containment.¹⁰ Historian John

⁶ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Advisor 1977-1981* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985), 23.

⁷ Wayne S. Smith, *The Closest of Enemies: A Personal and Diplomatic Account of U.S.-Cuban Relations Since 1957* (New York: W W Norton & Company Incorporated, 1988), 103.

⁸ Vance, 30.

⁹ Andrew Z. Katz, “Public Opinion and the Contradictions of Jimmy Carter’s Foreign Policy,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 30 (December 2000), 671, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com.proxygw.wrlc.org/doi/10.1111/j.0360-4918.2000.00138.x/pdf>

¹⁰ Odd Arne Westad, Editor, *The Fall of Détente: Soviet-American Relations During the Carter Years* (Scandinavian University Press North American, 1997).

Lewis Gaddis goes so far as to suggest that Carter and his advisers “developed no new strategy, but they did graft onto the basic premises of the old one certain highly visible initiatives designed to make it *seem* as though the American approach to the world had changed.”¹¹ It is difficult though to believe that the Carter administration did not sincerely wish a fresh approach, and this is proved by the initial efforts to normalize relations with Cuba. Even Castro, who understood certain public statements by the U.S. to be domestic policy-focused, has continuously praised Carter’s initiatives toward normalization of relations.

Over the course of his administration Carter would evolve to take a more hard line “traditional” stance on Cold War foreign policy, under the influence of his highly esteemed National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski. This stance in itself served as the main detriment to the US’s ability to further pursue normalization of relations, in addition to Carter’s seeming inability to make his policy goals understandable to the American public, severe criticism from foreign nations which had never before had relations with the U.S. on the basis of human rights, and his sometimes refusal to work with congress as had previous administrations. Since Carter increasingly viewed relations with Cuba in relation to the Soviet Union it is important to understand Carter’s basic policy approach toward the Soviet Union. It was a three-pronged and interchangeable depending on the situation on the basis of either human rights, détente, or containment. At one point, Carter entertained Soviet human rights activist Vladimir Bukovsky in the Oval Office, which drew fury from the Soviet Union and the accusation that Carter had interfered in the domestic policies of another country, which was against the United

¹¹ John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1982), 345.

Nations Charter.¹² Gaddis writes that Brzezinski had “an unbecoming reliance on the intellectual cliché of the moment” and sought inconsistent objectives. “The premise seemed to be that one could reform, negotiate with, and ignore the U.S.S.R., all at the same time.”¹³ The three-pronged approach “proved to be too complex for Americans to understand and accept and, when the Soviet Union engaged in what the Americans perceived as aggressive actions, Americans interpreted these actions in the framework they understood best: Containment.”¹⁴

¹² Westad, 107.

¹³ Gaddis, 346.

¹⁴ Westad, 112.