

From Confrontation to Negotiation

U.S. Relations with Cuba

Philip Brenner



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TO NEGOTIATION

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About the Book and Author

Nearly thirty years have passed since the United States first attempted to overthrow the fledgling Castro government. Despite enormous changes in the hemisphere, significant developments in the nature of Cuba's international relations, and an end to the cold war consensus in the United States that quietly sanctioned interference in and obstruction of Third World politics, U.S. policy toward Cuba has changed very little: It still embodies the failed dream of isolating Cuba and destroying the Cuban revolution.

In *From Confrontation to Negotiation: U.S. Relations with Cuba*, Philip Brenner provides a thoughtful overview of U.S.-Cuban relations since 1898, with an emphasis on the past ten years. Assumptions, goals, and continuities in U.S. policy are highlighted. He then offers a clear picture of the issues that divide the two countries and around which any discussions for a normalization of relations would likely turn.

Could discussions occur? Is a call for a less hostile relationship between the United States and Cuba politically feasible? What are the chances that Cuba and the United States can actually work out an accommodation? Dr. Brenner analyzes the domestic political factors in each country that shape policy and that might present possibilities for serious discussion. He then proposes a workable alternative Cuban policy for the United States that takes into account the fundamental concerns of both countries. The policy proposal is related to the framework adopted by Policy Alternatives for the Caribbean and Central America (PACCA).

Philip Brenner is associate professor of international relations at The American University, where he teaches in the Washington Semester Program. He is a member of the board of the National Security Archive and is author of *The Limits and Possibilities of Congress* (1983).



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A PACCA BOOK



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My daughter, Sarah, was born during the course of writing this book. The unending joy she brings bolstered me on dreary days and added special purpose to the project. My hope is that the book can contribute to reduced tension between the United States and Cuba and thereby help to promote a more peaceful world for her.

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Philip Brenner

Introduction: Realism About Cuba

AT A MEETING OF THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF a few months before the U.S.-sponsored Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961, talk among the generals began to turn casually around the possibility of an invasion by U.S. troops. To the commandant of the Marine Corps, General David M. Shoup, it was clear that his colleagues envisioned Cuba as a small island, perhaps a hundred miles long. He realized that an invasion plan based on such a major misperception would lead to nothing less than catastrophe, and in horror he superimposed a map of Cuba over one of the United States. The “small island” stretched from New York to Chicago.¹

That was neither the first time, nor the last, that U.S. officials had tried to come up with an easy solution for dealing with Cuba, based on misperceptions about it. For 150 years, would-be U.S. statesmen have seen Cuba variously as a sleepy island that could be bought, annexed, or crushed; as a mindless, unsure neophyte waiting to be wooed; and today as a puppet of the Soviet Union that threatens fundamental U.S. security. Yet Cuba does not lend itself to such facile characterizations that provide ready policy prescriptions.

Instead U.S. policy should be developed on the basis of the Cuban reality, which is complex:

- Cuba is only ninety miles from the United States, and this proximity offers the potential for economic, political, and social interaction; but Cuba also has a special relationship with the

Soviet Union, which does pose a potential threat to the United States;

- Its relationship with the Soviet Union provides significant security for Cuba; but it also makes Cuba uncomfortably vulnerable as a strategic target of the United States;
- U.S. dominance over Cuba before 1959 has left many marks on Cuba's culture: Baseball is the national sport, and symbols of the United States, such as jeans and rock music, are popular today; but the earlier relationship of subservience makes Cuba wary of the United States;
- One important link between the two countries is the more than one million Cuban-Americans in the United States who have emigrated since the 1959 revolution that brought Fidel Castro to power; but most are hostile to the regime in Cuba;
- Cuba is smaller than most countries in Latin America, though its population of 10.1 million people and land area of 43,000 square miles is greater than any country in Central America or the Caribbean; but it has the kind of influence with many Third World countries that is more typical of a larger nation.

This complexity does not make a viable policy unattainable. It only means that the policy must be rooted in a clear picture of Cuba and be responsive to real U.S. interests. A stark, undifferentiated image of a Cuban threat distorts reality and leads the United States to take actions against its own interest.

Cuba is one of the few countries in the world with which the United States does not have normal relations. Yet the United States cannot ignore Cuba. Not only is Cuba too close geographically, but it is also an important country in the region and has significant influence in the Third World. The question for the United States is not *whether* it will relate to Cuba. The question is *how* it will relate to Cuba.

The choices are either confrontation or negotiation. Since 1960 the United States has opted for the former. There is little benefit in this approach, and confrontation with Cuba generates tension that ripples throughout the hemisphere and needlessly increases the danger of a major conflict between the superpowers. Negotiation, in contrast, holds out the potential for the United States to secure several interests. Indeed, both countries would benefit from a rapprochement.

To be sure, the road from confrontation to negotiation would be more like an obstacle course than a freeway. It is littered with U.S. fears about Cuban communism and with Cuba's concerns about its