EXCURSUS IV

James Finn
Cuba’s Revolution,
The Twentieth Anniversary

Just twenty years ago, in January, 1959, I was in Havana. More important, so was Fidel Castro. President Fulgencio Batista had fled the country on December 31, 1958, and Castro had swept down from the hills to claim and proclaim his revolutionary victory. I was there—in the Palace, in fact—so he could give his victory speech. The atmosphere was exhilarating. “Fidel Fidel!” echoed and reechoed in the crowded streets. All was joy and high expectation.

Well, not all. I recall vividly the visit I paid to the Cuban prisons even as the carnival atmosphere filled the crowded streets. One prisoner I remember particularly. With out bitterness, anger, or vehemence, but with cool assurance, he told a number of us that Castro’s victory would not mean the prisons would cease to be occupied. There would simply be, he said, an exchange of prisoners.

I have, of course, forgotten that man’s admonitions. Nevertheless, I returned to the States to write quite sympathetic accounts of Fidel’s revolution and of Fidel. Even then, however, I did not expect that the Cuban revolution would necessarily follow a straight, unswerving path to the lower reaches of Utopia. In March of 1959 I wrote in the pages of this Journal:

In everything he has said and done, during and after the revolution, Castro has displayed vitality, imagination, and thoughtfulness. He has also, however, been oddly assertive and erratic. Even
today," and requested that precise statistics of the country's political prisoners be made public.

In international affairs Cuba has constituted itself as a force to be noticed. Through its foreign aid, economic and military, and through the use of Cuban troops abroad Fidel has gained an international platform. He has successfully withstood the Goliath to the north and has not only consolidated but expanded his influence. In international affairs the views of Cuba regularly coincide with those of the Soviets and the Third World bloc. For example, it indulges in the prescribed ritual of habitually denouncing the evils of colonialism, imperialism, and racism, and therefore those countries deemed most guilty. The United States obviously comes in for a lion's share of this tribute, but for a small country Israel also receives a large share. Zionism is excoriated and the PLO is lauded.

Today the Cuban presence and influence are evident less in South America - the continent Castro originally favored with his revolutionary attentions - than in Africa. Cuba has played an active role in over a dozen African countries, most notably in Angola, Mozambique, and Ethiopia. What Cuba has accomplished there and how the United States should evaluate that accomplishment are questions that continue to divide U.S. policymakers. For its part, the Cuban Government has often reiterated a principled commitment to revolutionaries in other countries, and Castro has said that Cuba "solidarity with the revolutionary movement in Africa" is not negotiable.

Apart from the obvious differences in size and power, Cuba and the U.S. are divided on significant points of ideology and policy. What are the prospects for negotiation? What are the benefits that would accrue to either country?

As our change of policy with the People's Republic of China has shown, ideology need not be a decisive factor; it can be properly subordinated to questions of national interest. There are some issues on which Cuba and the U.S. could probably agree rather easily, the resolution of which would benefit both countries, and others that are decidedly sticky. On Cuba's agenda there would be, we know, a demand that the U.S. accept Cuba as it sees itself, a revolutionary government. This would mean an end to acts of terrorism or political subversion launched from the United States; an end to the U.S. embargo; the return of Guantanamo naval base; access to U.S. scientific and technological advances; trade and investments; and freedom to pursue its own foreign policy. For Cuba some of the most important benefits would be economic and almost immediate.

For example, with Cuba less economically dependent on the USSR, it could be less subservient. It would be more open to U.S. political and cultural influences. Having amicable relations with the U.S., Cuba's ritual denunciations would be less extreme and would carry less weight. It is clear that, on balance, the gains that either country might expect are not so impressive that they will easily overwhelm the obstacles. Unfortunately, one cannot predict that the desirable relations that one would like to see between the U.S. and this Latin American country ninety miles from our coast are immediate on the horizon.

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**QUOTE/UNQUOTE**

**Death Benefits**

Mr. Nkomo came to Cape Town two decades ago as a penniless "migrant worker" from the Transkei homeland, 700 miles away, and apart from a brief spell in jail after a fatal traffic accident he has never been out of work since.

—*New York Times*, November 29

**Oh, It Was No Beat**

"They intended to use them (defense secrets). If the day ever comes when they decide to attack us, to do as one of their leaders once said, "Dsby us,"" Lacey said, referring to a boast once made by Khrushchev.

—*City News (N.Y.)*, October 31

**On the Meaning of "Client State"**

Since 1952 Professor Konvitz [of Cornell University] has been director of a project that prepares the laws of the Republic of Liberia and edits the opinions of its Supreme Court.

—dust jacket copy for *Judaism and the American Idea*, by Milton R. Konvitz

**God Works in Wondrous Ways**

The people on the street generally seemed a bit numb about the appointment of a non-Italian.

In the magnificent St. Peter's Square, after the ceremony insuring the papacy will continue as the world's longest continuing institution, Polli Grazia, a 56-year-old grandmother, said she could live with a foreign pope because "It was inspired by the Holy Spirit."

She added "Since God chose him, he cannot be worse than the Italians."

—Patrick Sullivan, *New York Post*, October 17