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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 32, No. 6, Contested Terrains (Nov., 2005), pp. 28-46

Published by: [Sage Publications, Inc.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30040265>

Accessed: 27/04/2012 20:06

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Contesting “Transition”

The U.S. Plan for a “Free Cuba”

by
Tim Anderson

The contradictions of U.S.-Cuba relations have rarely been more intense. The pattern of siege and resistance continues, the U.S. imperial project of remodeling Cuba faces new constraints, and a “transition” of sorts, conditioned by U.S. engagement but not determined by U.S. policy, is already occurring. Having snubbed the United Nations in its invasion of Iraq and while holding several hundred prisoners in its Guantánamo Bay base without charge or trial, the United States pretends concern for the rights of prisoners by denouncing Cuba’s jailing of 75 “dissidents,” and while it announces a package of economic sanctions aimed at overthrowing the Cuban system, U.S. exports to Cuba have skyrocketed. In 2004 the CBS News journalist Pamela Falk remarked that “sales to Cuba by U.S. farmers grow dramatically despite increased tension between Washington and Havana.” The U.S. businessman Kirby Jones confirmed this: “We have six months of the hottest rhetoric in my experience . . . but here [in Havana] we have 400-plus breadbasket representatives, a Republican Congressman, a former F16 pilot, and farmers from all over America, essentially saying ‘We don’t agree with this policy’” (Siegelbaum, 2004). Whereas in Iraq the United States invaded and overthrew the Iraqi government before lifting economic sanctions and sending in its big companies, in Cuba U.S. companies are arriving while economic sanctions are supposedly being tightened. Yet commercial links are just one part of the story at a time when the Bush administration has declared its right to carry out preemptive attacks against a large number of countries. The situation is precarious and dangerous. In ominous echoes of the build-up to the Iraq war, the U.S. accuses Cuba (without evidence) of developing biological weapons. What is going on, and what is behind the rhetoric?

This article will examine new contradictions in the U.S. language of “freedom” over Cuba, some new developments in its near half-century of economic siege and destabilization, and the new problems faced by U.S. arguments for a postsocialist “transition” in Cuba.

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LATIN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES, Issue 145, Vol. 32 No. 6, November 2005 28-46

DOI: 10.1177/0094582X05281112

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THE LANGUAGE OF "FREEDOM"

The United States has consistently claimed to support freedom and democracy for Cuba and for Cubans, but its actions have consistently demonstrated otherwise. A resolution of both houses of Congress on April 20, 1898, backed by President William McKinley, proclaimed in its first paragraph "that the people of the island of Cuba are and by rights must be free and independent" (quoted in Miranda Bravo, 1998: 28). Two years later the same Congress and president passed the Platt Amendment, which required Cuba to enact a permanent treaty by which it was forced to agree that the United States "could exercise the right to intervene" in Cuban affairs for a wide variety of reasons. The Platt Amendment was consistent with the 1823 Monroe Doctrine, by which the United States asserted its right to hegemony in the Americas. After confrontations in the 1930s, the U.S. withdrew its Platt Amendment demand, but only as a popular gesture after the installation of the U.S. puppet strongman Fulgencio Batista.

In April 1961, two years after the Cuban Revolution overthrew Batista and his corrupt dictatorship and just three days before a U.S.-led invasion attempt that included many of Batista's former soldiers, President John F. Kennedy claimed to support Cuban self-determination, saying: "There will not be, under any conditions, an intervention in Cuba by the United States Armed Forces. The basic issue in Cuba . . . [is] between Cubans themselves" (quoted in Arboleya, 2002: 78). After the failure of Kennedy's Bay of Pigs invasion and his missile-crisis promise to Khrushchev that the United States would not again try to invade Cuba, he and his brother Robert continued to plot the overthrow of the popular Cuban Revolution. Cuban public opinion was simply a tool to be manipulated. The U.S. State Department in 1961 urged intelligence to determine "the attitude of the Cuban people towards Castro," saying that if the majority of people supported the revolution, then what was needed was "to change that view amongst the majority of Cubans" (U.S. State Department, 1997, vol. 10: 391-396). It urged "[a denial of] money and supply to Cuba, cutting real incomes and finance with the aim of causing hunger, desperation, and the overthrow of the Government" (U.S. State Department, 1991, vol. 6: 886). After the failed invasion the CIA developed "Operation Mongoose," which argued for "acts of sabotage . . . [including] submarine sabotage of boats . . . [and against] select targets [such as] refineries, electrical plants and tire plants . . . extensive sabotage" (U.S. State Department, 1997, vol. 10: 428-430).

This "low-intensity warfare" began with coastal bombings in January 1960 (Zaldívar Diéguez, 2003: 21) and increased in intensity. On August 22, 1961, Richard Goodwin, Chief of the White House Working Group on Cuba,

sent a memo to President Kennedy urging him to “silently intensify . . . the economic pressure . . . discourage trade with Castro, putting in train sabotage activities against key industrial sectors such as refineries. This could produce groups of Cubans integrated under our political and ideological leadership.” In November 1961 Attorney General Robert Kennedy told a White House meeting, “My idea is to push the island with espionage, sabotage, general disorder” (U.S. State Department, 1997, vol. 10: 666–667). There was not the slightest commitment to Cuban self-determination in this policy.

Despite some modifications of the strategy, recent years have seen an intensification of the doublespeak. In May 2002 President George W. Bush announced “a proposal and a challenge which can put Cuba on the path to freedom. The United States has no design over the sovereignty of Cuba” (Bush, 2002b). In the same speech Bush presented a list of economic conditions that his administration demanded, summed up as “significant reforms based on the market.” Despite the talk of “freedom,” the economic demands were rather crude: corporate employers in Cuba were to be able to “pay employees as they wish . . . [and Cuba] must respect the right to property. Workers must be paid directly by their employers” (Bush, 2002b). This language was refined a little in a May 2004 report titled “Assistance to a Free Cuba,” an economic blueprint predicated on the liberal modernist assumption that the entire world must be in transition to Western-style market economies and political systems (Powell, 2004). However, at the urging of State Department officials, the language of the report was changed from “Cuba must” to proposals of how the United States could assist “if Cuba requests” (interview, Kelly Keiderling, May 12, 2004). This report, prepared by a group of U.S. officials with no Cuban members, claimed that the United States would “stand with the Cuban people against the tyranny of Fidel Castro” and proceeded to set out the conditions under which it would countenance the lifting of its economic blockade (Powell, 2004; White House, 2004). However, Cubans since the nineteenth century have rejected the claim that any U.S. regime has supported freedom and self-determination in Cuba. The Cuban government says that it “will never return to the horrible, pitiful, and inhumane condition of being a colony of the United States” (GRC, 2004: 4). They point to the consistent aggression of the United States against their social system and, in particular, to the 45 years of counterrevolutionary violence and economic blockade.

Although Kennedy was the most liberal and flexible U.S. president since the 1930s, it was he who established all the major elements of U.S. policy toward Cuba for the next 40 years: “economic stranglehold, diplomatic isolation, political discredit, domestic destabilization and encouragement of counterrevolutionary [violent] actions” (Arboleya, 2002: 45). However, the

form of this policy has shifted in the changing circumstances of succeeding decades. The major phases, jointly defined by changes in U.S. policy and Cuban resistance, have been the U.S. move to low-intensity warfare and economic blockade after the failure of its 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion and after Kennedy's 1962 October-crisis promises to the Soviets; diversion of the U.S. administration in the late 1960s, after the collapse of counterrevolutionary support in Cuba and the failure of the war in Vietnam; small openings in the 1970s due to some thawing in the cold war; an aggressive conservative resurgence during the "second cold war" of the 1980s, including proxy conflict with Cuba through the wars in Central America and southern Africa; renewed aggressive focus on Cuba during the country's economic crisis of the early 1990s, following the collapse of economic ties with the Soviet Union; and the current ambiguous period of commercial opening, accompanied by the Bush doctrine of preemptive warfare after the Al Qaeda attacks on the U.S. in 2001.

The U.S. arguments for a postcommunist "transition" in Cuba, asserting Cuba's place in a global trend toward "democracy and a market economy" (USAID, 1997; Powell, 2004), carry much of the doublespeak of previous eras. Yet there are constraints on current U.S. arguments of "freedom" and self-determination while the Cuban government retains substantial popular support and while U.S. global interventionism faces widespread hostility. Further, U.S. arguments about a "free Cuba" cannot really be understood without reference to the economic blockade and low-intensity warfare against the island.

SIEGE AND COVERT WARFARE

After the failed invasion at the Bay of Pigs and the subsequent missile crisis, the United States continued to train Cuban-exile groups at official military facilities such as Fort Benning and began to encourage semiautonomous operations by those groups. This latter strategy was intended to distance U.S. agencies from the bombings and murders, relying on the lack of accountability of the CIA and the U.S. doctrine of "plausible deniability" of its covert operations. A multitude of Miami-based organizations was created, all reliant on funds from the U.S. government and certain private foundations but with competing leadership groups. Their most persistent activities in the mid-late 1960s were terrorist sabotage and harassment operations focused on the placing of bombs on coastal shipping engaged in trade with Cuba. These bombings killed many people (Méndez Méndez, 2003). There were also operations to confuse Cuban pilots, sabotage communications, and introduce

corrosive agents into aircraft fuel. The U.S. government supplied a small flotilla of boats and planes, as well as weapons, for this purpose. The operations were run by the exile groups based in Miami, with facilities in Nicaragua and Costa Rica (Zaldívar Diéguez, 2003: 71–72, 115). In 1964–1966 the United States passed laws to isolate shipping from Cuba (part of the Foreign Aid Act) and to prohibit the shipment of food (part of the Food for Peace program) to any third-party country involved in trade with Cuba (Alarcón de Quesada and Alvarez Sánchez, 2001: 16).

Despite the damage and loss of life from the hundreds of paramilitary attacks, the exile groups made little impact inside Cuba and began fighting amongst themselves. As their impact in Cuba declined, their terrorism became internationalized. While in the 1960s they made 731 armed attacks on the Cuban coast and shipping and 156 armed attacks in the United States and elsewhere, in the 1970s there were only 16 attacks on the Cuban coast but 279 in the United States and other countries (Forment, 1984: 86). In 1972–1976 these included armed attacks on a large number of Cuban fishing boats in the Caribbean, bombings of Cuban commercial and airline offices in Montreal, Mexico, and Chile, bombings of commercial offices in Peru, Venezuela, and the Bahamas and of ships trading with Cuba, and the 1976 bombing of a Cuban airliner in Barbados, which killed 73 passengers (Zaldívar Diéguez, 2003: 138, 162–163). The exile groups had by this time built up their own particular mystique and networks, such that they welcomed the 1973 military coup in Chile. In 1975, the Bay of Pigs Invasion Veterans' Association awarded dictator Augusto Pinochet its "Medal of Freedom" (Dinges and Landau, 1980: 147).

The aims of these CIA-backed groups were broadly consistent with those of the public blockade: to destroy commercial and travel links with Cuba and to isolate the country so that somehow its social system might be overthrown. However, in the climate of "detente" in 1975, limited transactions between Cuba and U.S. subsidiaries were allowed so long as the products had no more than 20 percent U.S. content and no U.S. financing was involved (Alarcón de Quesada and Alvarez Sánchez, 2001: 18). In the late 1970s, under the Carter administration, some diplomatic and community visits between the two countries began, but these tiny public openings were not mirrored in the politics of the clandestine war. Between 1975 and 1979 Miami reactionaries murdered four Cuban-Americans (Luciano Nieves, Ramón Donéstevez, Carlos Muñiz, and Eulalio Negrín) who had dared to initiate a dialogue with Cuban leaders. Reprisals for such dialogue were ruthlessly enforced in the exile community (Arboleya, 2002: 149), and exile-group terrorism continued to enjoy impunity.

The Cuban exiles Luis Posada Carriles and Orlando Bosch are good examples of this impunity. Posada and Bosch both received CIA training in the United States in the early 1960s (Arboleya, 2002). Bosch became famous for his 1968 bazooka attack on the Polish ship *Polanica* in a Miami port, an attack for which he received a 10-year jail sentence. However, some Miami politicians celebrated the day of the attack as "Orlando Bosch Day" (Labañino Salazar, 2001: 33). Bosch was released from prison in 1972, left the United States, and moved through Latin America, setting up a group called the United Revolutionary Organizations Commando (CORU), that organized attempts to kill Fidel Castro and bombed and machine-gunned Cuban missions and airlines offices, killing several people in the process. In 1976 CORU blew up a Cuban airliner in Barbados, killing 73 people. Two Venezuelans were arrested for the crime and implicated Bosch and Posada. However, after 10 years in jail, Bosch was acquitted and Posada escaped from jail and the country (Arboleya, 2002: 137–138). Bosch returned to the United States and would have been deported but for a campaign waged by Florida politicians including Illeana Ros Lehtinen and Jeb Bush. President George H. Bush then freed Bosch, who now lives openly in Miami (NAPP, 2001: 5). After Venezuela, Posada went to El Salvador, where he worked with the Oliver North operation, helping to channel arms to the anti-Sandinista forces based in Honduras.

In November 1996 both Posada and Bosch, interviewed live on Miami television, claimed responsibility for ongoing terrorist actions against Cuba, which at that stage involved the bombing of tourist hotels. Later, in July 1998, the *New York Times* ran an interview with Posada in which he claimed responsibility for several bomb blasts at hotels in Havana, one of which had killed the young Italian tourist Favio di Celmo (NAPP, 2001: 6). Posada said that he had been receiving his funds from the Cuban American National Foundation (CANF), headed by Jorge Mas Canosa. Posada and Mas Canosa had trained together in U.S. government facilities at Fort Benning as far back as 1963 (Bardach and Rohter, 1998: 1). Yet no U.S. authority detained Posada. In September 1999 a special rapporteur for the United Nations Human Rights Commission published details of his findings that the CANF had financed and organized the placing of bombs at hotels in Varadero and Havana from April to October 1997 (Zaldívar Diéguez, 2003: 165–166). Yet Mas Canosa maintained the closest of relations with the U.S. government until his death in 1997. Posada was arrested only in 2000 when he was caught with three other Miami residents in Panama trying to organize yet another attempt to murder Fidel Castro at the Ibero-American summit. In April 2004 a Panamanian court sentenced Posada to eight years in jail. The *Miami Herald* called him a "colorful" and controversial "anti-Castro activist" (Robles,

2004). On August 25, 2004, the outgoing Panamanian president and U.S. ally Mireya Moscoso pardoned and released Posada “on humanitarian grounds” (*Granma Internacional*, 2004b). There was no word of protest from Washington over the release of Latin America’s most famous terrorist. In early 2005 Posada arrived in the United States and (in the face of extradition demands from Venezuela and Cuba) claimed political asylum, posing a new threat to the legitimacy of Washington’s “war on terror.”

THE BLOCKADE RENEWED

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the special trading relationship that Cuba had enjoyed with Eastern Europe, there was a renewal of U.S. blockade measures in an attempt to ensure that socialism in the Americas was snuffed out. The Soviet collapse triggered the equivalent of a great depression in Cuba: “[the] economy fell by 35% between 1989 and 1993 . . . imports fell from 8,500 million to 1,500 million; [we] lived 18 hours a day without electricity, no public transport, and hunger” (Pérez Roque, 2004a: 4). During this time the United States introduced laws to intensify and expand the blockade and to establish the conditions for a new Cuban government and social system. At the same time, Cuban socialism survived by opening up to tourism and allowing controlled private foreign investment in joint ventures, some small business operations, internal dollar transactions, and a diversification of trade links. By a unique form of structural adjustment it maintained its system of social guarantees, its health standards, and state regulation of labor relations. Despite serious shortages that persist to this day, conditions improved and economic growth resumed in 1996 (Anderson, 2002, 2003; Bohmer, 2001; Habel, 2004).

Dismissive of these substantial changes in Cuba, the U.S. Cuban Democracy Act of 1991 (the Torricelli Act, passed in 1992) and the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act of 1996 (the Helms-Burton Act) pursued the tradition of using the language of freedom, democracy, and self-determination while seeking aggressive extraterritorial controls. The Torricelli Act tightened and entrenched the bans on doing business with Cuba for U.S. subsidiaries in third countries, reinstated a blacklist of ships trading with Cuba, and restricted migrants’ remittances to Cuba. At the time this law came into effect Cuba had US\$700 million annually in trade with U.S.-linked companies, over 90 percent of this in food and medicine (Alarcón de Quesada and Alvarez Sánchez, 2001: 21). The Torricelli Act affects the import of European or Latin American products that have some U.S. content and trade with companies subject to takeovers by U.S. companies. After the wave of

European-U.S. takeovers and mergers of the 1990s, this severely restricted Cuba's opportunity to conduct international business (José A. Aguilar Trujillo, interview, May 26, 2004). While U.S. officials and some Cuban opposition figures claim that Cuba's economic woes have nothing to do with the U.S. blockade but are rather a consequence of the inefficiency of its planned system and the restriction of private enterprise (Kelly Keiderling, interview, May 12, 2004; Roca, 2002: 30), independent experts have confirmed the damage caused by the blockade and the refinements of the Torricelli Act. The major problems identified were lack of food and medicine supplies and denial of access to life-saving technologies (AAWH, 1997):

A humanitarian catastrophe has been averted only because the Cuban government has maintained a high level of budgetary support for a health care system designed to deliver primary and preventative health care to all of its citizens. Cuba still has an infant mortality rate half that of the city of Washington, DC . . . [but] the U.S. embargo has caused a significant rise in suffering and even deaths in Cuba.

The Helms-Burton Act has four sections: (1) it imposes sanctions against persons or companies from third countries who do business with Cuba (under a "trading in stolen goods" argument) and establishes the financing of the U.S.-organized "opposition"; (2) it continues the blockade until all nationalized properties have been returned and seeks to regulate the process of the overthrow of the Cuban Revolution (including stipulating specific people who are not to be included in a new government); (3) it establishes the rights of former owners of nationalized property to institute proceedings against those who "traffic" in these properties; and (4) it sets out rules for denying U.S. visas to those who do business with Cuba and to their families (Alarcón de Quesada and Alvarez Sánchez, 2001: 23–24, 34–35). The Cuban National Assembly identifies the "essence" of the Helms-Burton Act as "the illusory aspiration to return property to Batista's followers and the old ruling class, robbing Cubans of their land, homes, schools, factories, hospitals, and everything that belongs to the people" (NAPP, 2001: 14). One important feature is entrenching the blockade and the commitment to overthrow the Cuban Revolution in law. Now no U.S. president can significantly weaken either without Congressional approval.

The European Union (EU, now Cuba's biggest trading partner) opposes the third-party provisions of the Helms-Burton Act and has pursued disputes over it with the United States, but it has avoided public criticism of the United States on this issue (e.g., *¡Por Esto!*, 2004b). In 1998 the EU and the United States reached an agreement to protect U.S. claims in Cuba conditional on

amendments to the Helms-Burton Act — which have not yet occurred. Then in 2000 (following a successful claim by the Bacardi Company against a French-Cuban joint venture for Havana Club rum) the EU asked a World Trade Organization dispute panel to consider a 1999 U.S. regulation (Section 211) that bans Cuba-linked trademarks in the United States. Under the Helms-Burton provisions, the U.S. has issued “warnings” to a number of companies doing business with Cuba, for example, the Canadian company Sheritt International, the Mexican company DOMOS, the BM group of Israel, the Panamanian company Motores S.A., and the Spanish company Sol Melia (Alarcón de Quesada and Alvarez Sánchez, 2001: 25–30). On the denial of visas, a U.S. government web site confirms that by August 2002 18 executives of two foreign companies had been excluded from entry into the United States and more than a dozen companies had pulled out of Cuba or altered their plans to invest there because of the threat of action under the Helms-Burton Act (U.S. State Department, 2003).

However, in the middle of this period, in 1995, there was a contradictory development—a nearly effective migration agreement between the two countries. U.S. policy had encouraged illegal migration (including the hijacking of ships and planes) by (1) maintaining the 1966 Cuban Adjustment Act, which gives the special privilege of automatic residence to Cubans who arrive on U.S. shores, but (2) refusing to issue legal visas to Cubans in Cuba and (3) not prosecuting persons who arrive from Cuba by hijacking planes or boats. At the same time, until the mid-1990s the Cuban government regulated travel fairly tightly and viewed migration to the United States with suspicion if not as a betrayal of the country. Cuban migration to the United States has a long history and, like that of other Latin American countries, is overwhelmingly driven by economic motives (see Rodríguez Chavez, 1999). New waves of migration have been triggered by major shifts in Cuba-U.S. relations. The 1995 accords came about as a result of the desire of the United States to control a large influx of illegal Cuban migrants and the desire of the Cuban government to set up an orderly exit procedure (Rodríguez Chavez, 2000). The agreement provided for the issuance of a “minimum” quota of 20,000 U.S. residence visas each year by the U.S. Interests Section in Havana (there is no consulate, as the two countries do not have diplomatic relations). Although there has been some disagreement over the numbers of visa approvals, the Cuban foreign affairs minister was able to say in 2004 that “in the last ten years almost 200,000 Cubans have been able to legally emigrate to the U.S.A.” (Pérez Roque, 2004a: 4). This move was accompanied by substantial Cuban government liberalization. There are now few barriers on the Cuban side (other than lack of funds for travel and some work commitments by professionals) to Cubans’ migrating to or visiting the United States. At the

same time, visits to Cuba by U.S. citizens (including Cuban-Americans visiting their families) have sharply increased. In 2003 about 85,000 U.S. citizens visited Cuba (Leany Torres, interview, May 24, 2004), compared with 10,500 in 1992 (ONE, 2003: Chap. 12). Possibly as many as 75–80 percent of the 2003 visitors came with a “license” from their government. The numbers of Cuban citizens visiting the United States rose to over 38,000 in 2000, but by 2003 U.S. restrictions had cut this to less than 7,000 (Pérez Roque, 2004a).

This “seminormalization” of immigration procedures is fragile for several reasons. First, as the migrant and visitor traffic has increased, the United States has become concerned that income flows to Cuba from travel and family remittances are undermining its economic blockade. Consequently, it has restricted visitor access just as Cuba has relaxed it. From the Cuban side, Cuban emigrants no longer have to wait for five years to return to Cuba, nor do they have to stay in hotels, and foreign resident Cubans no longer need to apply for permission to reenter (Pérez Roque, 2004b: 4–5). The United States, however, now imposes limits on how often Cuban-Americans can visit Cuba, whom they can visit, how much money they can spend whilst in Cuba, and how much money they can send to their families. Secondly, the United States maintains the ban on its own citizens’ visiting and therefore spending money in Cuba. Despite this, it has issued thousands of “licenses” for sports teams, journalists, and others to visit Cuba, and many thousands more visit “illegally.” Cuba (called a “totalitarian police state” by the U.S. government) imposes no such restrictions on U.S. citizens visiting Cuba. The United States has been policing the ban on its own citizens more seriously in recent years, assigning 24 full-time Treasury officials to the task. There were more than 10,000 investigations and US\$8 million in fines between 1990 and 2003 (Salomon, 2004). Finally, it is only very recently that the United States has begun to prosecute and perhaps therefore deter Cuban hijackers. In April 2004 the Cuban government welcomed a U.S. federal court decision to jail six Cuban plane hijackers—the first decision of its kind in decades. Cuba’s Department of Foreign Affairs said that Cuba considered the court decision “a positive act which will contribute to the struggle against the commission of violent acts associated with emigration . . . it will direct Cuban emigration towards secure, legal and orderly channels, and oppose the use of violence . . . such as the forcible seizure of boats and planes” (*¡Por Esto!*, 2004a). The U.S. court decision could represent another step toward the seminormalization of Cuban-U.S. migration. If this is the case, this process—combined with pressures for the liberalization of U.S. restrictions on U.S. tourists—will increase the difficulties for the Bush administration’s efforts to isolate the neighboring country.

THE BUSH CONFRONTATION

Along with the seminormalization of migration, under the Clinton and Bush administrations another countertrend emerged in 2000. Long-term pressures from U.S. agribusiness managed to force a vote in Congress to allow sales of food and medicines to Cuba provided that they did not involve U.S. banks or U.S. finance (Alarcón de Quesada and Alvarez Sánchez, 2001: 29–30). Under ordinary circumstances this might have appeared to be a significant breach of the economic blockade, but the Helms-Burton Act remained intact and, after the Al Qaeda attacks, President George W. Bush launched a series of aggressive policies against a large number of countries, including Cuba. The main elements of U.S. belligerence threatened U.S.-Cuba relations: in 2002 an open doctrine of world domination, in 2003 a disregard of the United Nations and international law over the invasion of Iraq, and the self-proclaimed right to conduct preemptive wars. Prior to 2001 a Cuban analyst had written that, while U.S. aims as regards Cuba remained unchanged, its tactics were far less clear: “The U.S. foreign policy’s strategic direction doesn’t inexorably lead to a specific policy. It could equally include the blockade’s maintenance, military invasion, or a political opening favoring peaceful penetration. [But] the strategic goal continues to be to destroy the Revolution” (Arboleña, 2002: 241). Peaceful openings appeared distant when in 2002 Bush said that the United States had identified “terrorist cells” in more than 60 countries and that the U.S. military “must be ready to be immediately deployed in whatever obscure corner of the world . . . we are ready for preventive attack” (Bush, 2002b). Critics of the U.S. imperial project point to the historical continuities in Bush’s strategy (Chomsky, 2003: 14), but U.S. tactics also make a big difference to a small country like Cuba.

At the big-picture level, the U.S. empire, newly defined, looks like the same hegemonic neoliberal project that demands ideological compliance as well as resource and market servility, but to this is now added the paranoia of economic decline (huge trade deficits and capital import dependence), a looming energy crisis (with increasing oil and gas imports and failing reserves), and a lack of restraint following its reactions to the attacks of September 2001. The factors at play in U.S. relations with Cuba include, on the one hand, a historic mission to crush Cuba’s “bad example” in the hemisphere (sustaining aggression that also effectively blocks political liberalization in Cuba), its new and wide-ranging contingency war plans, the added pressures of an appalling war and public relations disaster in Iraq and, on the other hand, the commercial openings driven by powerful U.S. agribusiness anxious to acquire new markets, growing U.S. tourism in Cuba, and a fragile truce on migration.

Under Bush, the ideological offensive against Cuba was stepped up, with provocations and a diplomatic offensive to isolate the country. As of 2003 the United States had made no real diplomatic progress at the UN. Indeed, from the 1990s on Cuba had gained consistent and strong international support for its string of UN General Assembly motions condemning the U.S. blockade. Only the United States, Israel, and one or two other countries (different small nations at different times) had opposed these resolutions. Yet the U.S. government for some time had been goading the Cuban government and using its reactions to some effect. As part of his support for the Miami-based Cuban groups, in the early 1990s President George H. Bush had given some U.S. Air Force planes to the group Brothers to the Rescue, and this group had begun making unauthorized flights over Havana. Alarmed at the possibility of bombings in the midst of a CANF-backed hotel bombing campaign and having delivered multiple warnings to U.S. authorities, the Cuban Air Force shot down two of these planes in February 1996 as they flew over Havana (NAPP, 2001: 8–10). This incident was used to push the Clinton administration to pass the Helms-Burton Act. Yet, rather than cooperate with the Cubans to prevent further bombings in Havana, in September 1998 the FBI arrested five undercover Cuban agents who were carrying out surveillance on the Miami groups (Miami5, 2005) and eventually convicted them of conspiracy to commit espionage. There was no evidence that they sought access to any U.S. government information, but they were sentenced to long prison terms. The Cuban government now has a huge campaign to free these men. It says that the five were unjustly jailed for their patriotic attempts to protect Cuba from terrorist plans that the U.S. government would not stop (e.g., Pérez Roque, 2003: 25).

Frustrated at these provocations, the Cuban government cracked down on several small groups that had been receiving U.S. government funds for several years, including funds from some conservative foundations in the United States and Spain. In 2003 75 Cubans were sentenced to substantial prison terms, after very rapid trials, for two specific crimes under Cuban law: (1) “[acting] in the interest of a foreign state with the purpose of harming the independence of the Cuban state” and (2) “seek[ing] out information to be used in the application of the Helms-Burton Act, the blockade, and the economic war against our people” (Pérez Roque, 2003: 30–31). The United States has a law that requires the destruction of the Cuban socioeconomic system. In response, Cuba has a law that bans Cubans from collaborating with that U.S. law. The jailing of these “dissidents” (Cuba calls them “mercenaries”) was raised by the United States before the UN Human Rights Commission and, after a flurry of U.S. lobbying, the condemnation of Cuba and demand for a UN investigator passed with a majority of one. This was a rare

success for U.S. diplomacy. The Cuban punishments seemed harsh, given that these small groups were thoroughly penetrated by Cuban government agents (see Elizalde and Baez, 2003) and were not so much dangerous as U.S.-sponsored secret societies and often channels for personal advantage or migration (Pérez Roque, 2003: 40). However, in the UN debates the context of the U.S.-Cuba confrontation was lost, as was that of human rights on a global scale. There was anger in many parts of Latin America over the vote (e.g., Balam Pereira, 2004), but the United States saw the splitting of European support from Cuba as a diplomatic victory (Kelly Keiderling, interview, May 12, 2004). For Cuba such isolation could be dangerous. The Cuban government claims to have been “patient” with the groups, which were at least partly organized and certainly funded by U.S. agencies including the Interests Section in Havana (Pérez Roque, 2003: 16), but the issue has caused something of a rift with Europe, which remains Cuba’s most important export market and a potentially important diplomatic buffer against a hostile U.S. administration.

In this context the Bush administration delivered, in May 2004, a comprehensive plan for a postsocialist “transition” in Cuba. The 450-page report of the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba, chaired by Secretary of State Colin Powell, increased U.S. funds for opposition groups (the U.S. Interests Section falsely claims that it is not funding such groups [see Pérez Roque, 2003: 8]), imposes new restrictions on family visits and remittances, calls for the establishment of a Truth Commission, adds more money for U.S.-funded propaganda transmissions (the Miami-based Radio Martí and Television Martí) including illegal transmissions from a C-130 military aircraft, demands a “market economy” in Cuba, and appears to offer a huge range of aid to a Cuban government that meets with its approval (Powell, 2004). The project is clearly hegemonic in the tradition of the 1901 Platt Amendment (Pérez Roque, 2004b). Even one opposition figure, jailed for many years in Cuba, has denounced the plan as “annexationist” (Martínez, 2004). There is now a “Transition Coordinator” for Cuba at the State Department (Powell, 2004). The issues are broader than simple compensation for property nationalized in 1959–1960. Under the heading of a “free economy,” the United States requires that a “Free Cuba” join the World Bank, decontrol prices (specifically including petroleum prices), engage in a comprehensive and “effective privatization program,” and enforce new property rights and various “free market mechanisms.” The United States will also “encourage a free Cuba to settle outstanding [property] claims issues as expeditiously as possible” (Powell, 2004: xxvi–xxvii). This alone could put the Cuban people in debt for as much as US\$100 billion (Sherman, 1995) for inflated claims

unilaterally developed in the United States, with interest added, over American and Cuban properties nationalized after January 1, 1959.

The new measures mainly consolidate existing measures, but they are peculiar for the new restrictions they place on U.S. citizens. "Abuses" of educational travel by U.S. citizens are to be stopped, and student programs may now be authorized only under certain conditions, including "when the program directly supports U.S. policy goals." Student travel from the United States may now be approved only for programs lasting "at least ten weeks" (U.S. State Department, 2005). This seems to be an attempt to block the many short study tours by U.S. university students, which may be seen as solidarity tourism. Family visits to Cuba by Cuban-Americans are to be limited to one every three years and only to direct family (i.e., not aunts, uncles, and cousins). The amount of money that can be spent on these visits and on remittances to families is to be further restricted (White House, 2004). Such remittances probably amounted to Cuba's second-largest source of hard-currency earnings (after tourism) in 2003–2004 (ONE, 2003). The Cuban government responded very rapidly by freezing sales of luxuries and imports and then raising their prices (*Granma Internacional*, 2004a: 7). Ominously, in view of the pretext for the 2003–2004 Iraq war, the report accuses Cuba of various unspecified crimes including building weapons of mass destruction: "harboring terrorists, committing espionage . . . fomenting subversion . . . [and] at least a limited developmental offensive biological weapons research and development effort" (White House, 2004). The report presents no evidence to support the claims about terrorism or biological weapons; the reference to espionage is probably to the five men jailed in Florida.

Despite this hostile plan, which provoked a demonstration of 1.2 million people in Havana on May 14, 2004, the big U.S. agricultural exporters have made their breakthrough and are already trading with Havana. In April 2004, 400 U.S.-based agricultural trade representatives met with Cuban business coordinators in Havana and signed contracts for about US\$100 million. Contracts have included rice, milk, cattle, and corn. The Cuban import agency ALIMPORT says that total purchases from the United States are now US\$644.6 million, including shipping. John S. Kavulich of the New York-based U.S.-Cuba Trade and Economic Council puts the figure at US\$430 million, after deducting shipping costs. Stuart E. Proctor Jr. of the USA Rice Federation said, "We want to get back our former number one export market. Barriers are not in the importing country, but in the U.S." (Siegelbaum, 2004). Since all transactions must be in cash, U.S. officials agree that this is the "best possible" deal for U.S. exporters (Kelly Keiderling, interview, May 12, 2004). However, at the moment it is a one-way street, with U.S. companies still banned from purchasing Cuban goods such as medical supplies,

sugar, or nickel. This represents a neo-mercantilist approach to Cuba, contrary to U.S. “free trade” ideology.

The United States is also running strongly on its “human rights” campaign against Cuba. Its main focus since 2003 has been the 75 jailed “dissidents” and complaints about the Cuban prison system. On the other hand, a U.S. State Department report acknowledges that Cuba in 2003 had “no political killings . . . no reports of politically motivated disappearances,” no reports of torture, no reports of religious repression, little discrimination, compulsory and free schooling, a universal health system, substantial artistic freedom, and no reports of torture (U.S. State Department, 2004). The report does say that “prisoners . . . often were subjected to repeated, vigorous interrogations”—a somewhat less dramatic “abuse” than the very public tortures and murders of Iraqi prisoners by the U.S. armed forces in 2004.

A further anomaly was the U.S. State Department’s quietly agreeing, in July 2004, to exempt from new travel restrictions the 85 U.S. minority students studying on Cuban scholarships at the Latin American Medical School in Cuba (BAW, 2004). U.S. tourists are banned from travel because they would spend money in Cuba, but U.S. citizens are allowed to hold Cuban scholarships because this does not require any flow of U.S. funds to Cuba. Thus another peculiar aspect of the U.S.-Cuba economic relationship is that Cuba has an effective foreign aid program for disadvantaged groups in the United States that is sanctioned by the U.S. State Department.

“TRANSITION” AND THE U.S.-CUBA RELATIONSHIP

The Bush administration claims that Cuba is a “brutal dictatorship” (Bush, 2002b) or a “totalitarian police state” (U.S. State Department, 2005) are plainly false. Cubans are not brutalized; they move and speak freely and with quite high levels of participation in their political system. Their guaranteed rights to health, education, and the basic necessities of life are second to none in Latin America, and basic services were maintained throughout the depression of the 1990s. Equally false is the U.S. claim to be supporting “liberty and democracy” in Cuba (White House, 2004). The report of the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba (Powell, 2004) simply consolidated the plans for a U.S.-directed political and economic system. Yet the U.S. plan for the overthrow of the Cuban system faces new constraints.

Cuba liberalized in the 1990s with electoral reforms, more participatory initiatives, foreign investment, and small-business reforms, but the United States did not make any substantial encouraging response to any of these openings. In fact, it lost investment opportunities to European companies.

U.S. intransigence over the nationalizations of the 1960s has become intransigence over control of a demanded "transition" process. International arbitration (e.g., over the nationalizations or the Guantánamo Bay enclave) is not possible. The United States will not submit to international institutions unless it controls them, and Cuba does not have faith that the United States will not be able to manipulate those systems (Miranda Bravo, 1998).

Arboleya (2002: 241) seems to be right in saying that, while the U.S. strategic aim remains unchanged, the tactics are not predetermined. There are new and dangerous elements in current U.S. policy but also contradictory currents. The danger for Cuba in Bush's tightening of the 45-year-old blockade is first the desperation that this may create for the Cuban people and second the real threat of a provocation from the planned military over-flights, which may interfere with Cuban communications systems (Leany Torres, interview, May 24, 2004). Cuba is careful not to create a provocation—it is the weaker party and has never made an aggressive move against the United States itself—but it is also proud and defensive of its rights under international law.

There seems little prospect of a Cuban "transition" as defined in U.S. law and the 2004 report, but there is indeed a transition taking place in Cuba. The form of this transition is controlled by Cuban adherence to shared institutions (in particular, health and social security) and regulated investment, but it is also strongly influenced by the new structural contradictions of the U.S.-Cuba relationship. Cuba's transition is influenced by the expansion in tourism (now the country's biggest industry), seminormalized migration (including family visits and remittances), and the substantial new trade openings for U.S. industry (currently food but also potentially pharmaceuticals). These new forces will not derail U.S. imperial designs, but they are combining to undermine the blockade and threaten to reinvent, in some new form, the historical links between the two countries. The openings created by the U.S. exporters are small and one-sided but powerful, with the support of interests in both countries. They are not likely to be reversed. A law to remove restrictions on U.S. tourists traveling to Cuba easily passed both houses of U.S. Congress in 2003 before being vetoed by the president (Kelly Keiderling, interview, May 12, 2004). U.S. liberalization of the restrictions on the freedom of movement of its own citizens would transform U.S.-Cuban social and economic relations. One estimate, from the American Association of Travel Agents, has several million U.S. tourists visiting the island in the first few years after the bans are removed (Pérez Roque, 2004a). There have also been significant protests in Miami over the impact of further restrictions on family visits by Cuban-Americans (Baró Diaz, 2004).

Cuban independence and creativity seem likely to continue to frustrate the plans for a U.S.-controlled “transition,” yet a transition of sorts is already under way. This transition is conditioned by U.S. engagement but not determined by U.S. policy. The main new constraints on the recently consolidated U.S. plans for Cuba are the new links being developed by a changing Cuban émigré community, new trade openings made by U.S. exporters, and a Congress pressing for freedom of movement for U.S. citizens. Powerful forces within the United States will continue to impose constraints on a belligerent U.S. administration, but in the current uncertain international climate there seem to be no certain outcomes.

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