

The Tomassi Essay
COCKTAIL DIPLOMACY: THE UNITED STATES
AND CUBA DISCUSS RAPPROCHEMENT
1961–1964

Christopher Ingalls Haugh

On August 16, 1961, C. Douglas Dillon, the United States Secretary of the Treasury, was at the Inter-American Economic and Social Conference in Punta del Este, Uruguay. The conference had progressed without interruption until Ernesto “Che” Guevara—the revolutionary and Cuban Minister of Industry—gave a speech rebuking the United States, calling its policies imperialistic and its hemispheric objectives insidious.¹ Dillon had a hardline message in response: to acknowledge Guevara’s speech would “betray the thousands of patriotic Cubans who are still awaiting and struggling for the freedom of their country.”² Dillon reiterated that the United States would not recognize Castro’s permanency.³ Hours later, Guevara had a message for Richard Goodwin, a member of the U.S. delegation: the revolution could not be defeated, but for economic reasons, Cuba sought a *modus vivendi* with the United States. As evidence of his sincerity, Guevara said Cuba would consider restitutions for expropriated property and reconsider its relationship with the Soviet Union.⁴ Guevara’s encounter with Goodwin began a series of informal negotiations between Castro and the Kennedy administration. This schizophrenic diplomatic moment illustrates that even as public U.S.-Cuban relations epitomized Cold War hostility, several unofficial discussions about normalization call into doubt this interpretive paradigm. This essay examines such contradictory political moments. Despite the enmity and ideological gap between the two states, a series of informal exchanges shows that normalization was a distinct policy possibility in the early 1960s.

Christopher Haugh graduated from the University of California, Berkeley in 2012 with a degree in history. He is currently studying international development at the University of Oxford.

This essay will argue that successive U.S. administrations made decisions based on their effects on public image. Dreading the label of being “soft” on communism, successive administrations opted for the short-term benefits of oppositional politics rather than the long-term stability of normalization. What is more, these actions reflected cognitive dissonance: each president saw *modus vivendi* with Cuba as in the national interest, yet each felt it was his obligation as commander-in-chief to project symbolic strength. With the world believed to be in ideological stalemate between liberal capitalism and communism, each president lived by a single foreign policy aphorism: any perceived failure by the United States was the Soviet Union’s gain. Thus, U.S. presidents oscillated between aggression and negotiation. Castro also genuinely sought normalization. Time and again, Castro’s surrogates offered to negotiate sacrosanct topics, including restitution for expropriated property and the Cuban-Soviet alliance. These diplomatic openings challenge the conventional U.S. narrative, which portrays Castro as a Soviet proxy, instead revealing a reconciliatory and flexible head of state. While Cuba never ceased to be the proverbial thorn in the side of the United States, there was a brief moment when a durable peace was within reach.

The U.S.-Cuban Cold War relationship has fascinated historians for decades. However, few academics have addressed Castro and the Kennedy administration’s attempts toward rapprochement. Negotiations occurred in a climate of mutual distrust built over decades of patron-client interaction. Since the United States developed a preponderance of power in the nineteenth century, it had treated Latin America as its sphere of influence.⁵ Throughout the twentieth century, the United States undertook numerous military interventions in Cuba under the legal auspices of documents like the Platt Amendment, which reinforced U.S. imperial power.⁶ By the eve of the revolution, Cuba had become a locus for American corporate investment, exotic tourism, and growing local resentment.⁷ With the advent of the Cold War, this patron-client relationship was tested. Both the U.S.S.R. and the United States believed the Third World to be integral to their national interest.

This mentality perpetuated imperial modes of interaction as neo-colonialism was re-imposed on the region.⁸

In post-revolutionary Cuba, Fidel Castro's anti-Americanism and the United States' distrust of Latin American nationalists intensified this prickly regional relationship.⁹ Cuban nationalists, such as Castro, cultivated fervent anti-U.S. worldviews to combat the "northern colossus,"¹⁰ thus representing a nationalist malignancy towards the United States. During the Cold War, the respective doctrine of each U.S. president was devoted to the containment of global communism.¹¹ Fearing communist "contagion" in the Western Hemisphere, the U.S. abided by a policy of "no more Cubas" throughout the Cold War.¹² However, counter to prevailing U.S. opinions, the U.S. government was initially fearful of Castro's nationalism rather than his Marxist-Leninism.¹³ Indeed, Castro allied with the U.S.S.R. not because of any communist sympathies, but for the economic benefits of sugar markets and subsidized oil.¹⁴ Thus, hostile political decisions and historical memory, rather than rigid ideology, determined the international schism..

In orthodox Cold War narratives, Castro is portrayed as a Soviet proxy.¹⁵ However, Cuba retained its autonomy throughout the Cold War.¹⁶ Castro turned to the Soviets for protection, but always sought independence in his foreign policy.¹⁷ Moreover, Castro's paramount goal was the revolution's survival, which meant that he would reach a cooperative pact if his existence depended on it.¹⁸ In this revisionist interpretation, an understanding between Cuba and the United States appeared plausible.

On a theoretical level, one must also consider what conditions make normalization achievable. Realists believe that all state decisions are made based on a rational analysis of a system's balance of power. This "cult of power" theory postulates that rapprochement is nearly impossible because it violates a state's central goal to maximize unilateral power.¹⁹ Liberal political scientists espouse democratic peace theory, claiming democracies that share institutional constraints and ideological norms do not go to war with one another.²⁰ Some liberal academics also support commercial peace theory, claiming that peace occurs when states build interconnected

economies through trade.²¹ These paradigms would conclude that cooperation does not emanate from diplomacy, but out of military power, political similarities, or economic interdependence. However, both liberal and realist arguments for durable peace neglect the importance of addressing past conflicts through normal diplomacy. Constructivists like Yinan He argue that in “deep interstate reconciliation,” formerly antagonist states must build a “relationship cemented not only by shared short-run security needs but also by sustainable mutual understanding and trust” through standard diplomacy.²² This paper will anchor its analysis on these constructivist peace theories of diplomacy.

Political scientists have also shown that the American presidency is inherently a symbolic position. This paper will draw from Michael Grow’s “symbolic battlefield” thesis for its theoretical foundation.²³ Unlike historians who claim that U.S. policy in Latin America was based exclusively on national security or economic interest, Grow argues that policy had larger implications for U.S. presidents.²⁴ For foreign policy professionals, challenges to U.S. superiority in Latin America undermined the United States’ international prestige and credibility. As a result, each president sought to project a hyper-cultivated image of “cold warrior” strongman. Grow grounds his argument in examples of coercive interventions that were “deliberate demonstration[s] to the world that U.S. power was not only credible but invincible.”²⁵ As Grow and other authors have argued, each president was affected by symbolic influences such as electoral concerns, global political imagery, and personal vendettas.²⁶ In Cuba specifically, Castro’s defiance took on particularly powerful symbolic meaning to the U.S. president, because his government had become a direct threat to U.S. power by transforming historically subservient Cuba into a regional insurgent.²⁷

While only a handful of authors have written on the specific topic of U.S.-Cuban normalization, none have utilized Grow’s political symbolism theory to ground their analysis. One school of authors led by Piero Gleijeses argues that normalization was never a possibility because Castro did not intend to negotiate honestly.²⁸

Edward Gonzalez concurs with Gleijeses, writing that reconciliation would have required that Cuba abandon its international revolutionary ethos in exchange for economic development—a decision Castro would have never made.²⁹ Stephen Rabe and Richard Bissel both argue that the United States would only accept full surrender by Castro.³⁰ Finally, Thomas Paterson and Louis Pérez contend that the bitter experiences of the first years of the revolution tainted any negotiation thereafter.³¹ On the other hand, authors like Don Bohning, Archibald Ritter, and Daniel Erikson argue that reconciliation was possible after covert U.S. policy failed to eliminate Castro.³² However, these arguments lack substantive analysis of the actual negotiations. Each scholar offers sweeping conclusions without thoroughly analyzing the primary documents. Others wrote their arguments before U.S. classified documents were revealed to the public.

The preeminent scholar in the field of U.S.-Cuban rapprochement is the National Security Archive's Peter Kornbluh, who used the same top-secret agency documents as this essay in writing his forthcoming book, *Talking With Fidel*. In two articles for *Cigar Aficionado*, Kornbluh lays out four conclusions based on his analysis of the Kennedy-Castro negotiations.³³ Kornbluh states that Castro was intent on reconciliation with the United States but was never willing to alter Cuba's domestic political conditions or its militant Third World policies. Because of this intractable stance, Kornbluh also concludes that the "quid pro quo approach" could not work, as it left too much time for intervening forces to foil an agreement. Finally, Kornbluh determines that "moving quickly and unilaterally to lay the groundwork for better ties is likely to produce the best results."³⁴ Kornbluh's conclusions are germane to normalization theory, but do not address the greater meaning behind the diplomacy. This paper will pursue the broader implications of these documents and this moment of diplomatic hope.

From this literature, it becomes apparent that the Castro-Kennedy negotiations remain largely overlooked. This paper will shed light not only on the U.S.-Cuban relationship and the Cold War generally, but will offer a case study for policymakers working

on normalization in other contexts around the world. Moreover, the topic of rapprochement is still significant today. Even as the ideological relevance of the Cold War recedes into history, anachronistic U.S.-Cuban hostilities persist. In this modern context, how and why this glimmer of diplomatic hope in the 1960s was squandered demands further consideration. Only through additional study of this historical moment can conclusive solutions be sought.

In order to make these arguments about informal diplomacy, this paper will utilize a combination of recently declassified U.S. government documents, contemporary newspaper articles, and the memoirs of important individuals. By drawing from a wide variety of sources, this paper can thoroughly analyze this diplomatic moment. Each description of secret meetings, phone discussions, and policy decisions has been compared to other accounts by different authors with distinctive motivations and levels of retrospect. This approach minimizes the discrepancies in each source's details as well as complicating the accounts of the memoirs and the U.S. government memorandums.

CASTRO REACHES OUT

By 1963, Guevara's olive branch was largely forgotten in Washington as U.S.-Cuban relations deteriorated further. In December 1961, Castro openly referred to himself as a Marxist-Leninist, and two months later the United States intensified its economic embargo on Cuba. Eight months later, the Cuban Missile Crisis brought the United States to the brink of nuclear war with the Soviet Union. U.S.-Cuban relations were then at an all-time low. To Castro's government, the United States solidified its position as a militant imperialist power, while for the American public, Castro became a maniacal Soviet foot soldier.

In this atmosphere of hostility, on April 30, 1963, Lisa Howard, a thirty-three year old ABC correspondent, returned from her groundbreaking weeklong trip to Havana.³⁵ On her trip, Howard interviewed many high-ranking officials, including Raúl Castro and his wife Vilma Espín, Che Guevara, the foreign minister Raúl Roa

García, and Fidel Castro's personal physician and confidant, Rene Vallejo. On April 22, Howard finally tracked down Castro, and the two talked for hours with Vallejo serving as an interpreter.³⁶

The interview took a turn Howard did not expect. Knowing that Howard had previously interviewed Khrushchev, Castro asked for her thoughts on his character. Howard responded that the Soviet Premier was a "shrewd politician who would break and dispose of Castro when the Soviets no longer needed him."³⁷ In the silence that followed, Castro simply nodded in what Howard believed was "skeptical agreement."³⁸ Then, without provocation, Castro mentioned that if the United States wanted to normalize relations with Cuba, then Kennedy would have to "make the first move."³⁹ When Howard responded that Castro might have to make the initial gesture, Castro said that "steps were already being taken" and that the U.S. simply needed to limit its sponsorship of exile raids for accommodation to move forward. Castro's comments on rapprochement would be the greatest revelation that morning.

Howard filed a report that aired on May 10, 1963 detailing her conversation with Castro. Howard's account appeared to contradict what many in the United States had wrongly assumed. Castro was not staunchly opposed to the United States. Moreover, Howard was convinced of Castro's honest intent, writing that his statements were "Surely [. . .] not mere propaganda utterings." According to Howard, Castro sought an end to the U.S. trade embargo and desperately wanted independence from his Moscow patrons. She suggested that he was willing to make "substantial" concessions regarding the most inviolable roadblocks, including the presence of Soviet personnel in Cuba, compensation for expropriated American property, and Cuba's role as a revolutionary training ground.⁴⁰ However, Howard counseled caution to American policymakers moving forward.

Castro is an intensely proud man and, therefore, hesitant about making a precise and formal bid for negotiations that might be rejected out of hand—particularly where the United States is concerned. . . . Castro may be emotional and impulsive, but he is also a pragmatic politician. He knows that his one hope of

gaining greater freedom from Moscow is through some sort of détente with the United States.⁴¹

Howard's article encouraged the United States to pursue this opportunity. "In the absence of a better idea . . . a little verbal probing seems in order," Howard wrote. "Why, then, should not the United States government profitably fish in these troubled waters?"⁴² If one trusts Howard's assessment of Fidel Castro, it suggests that Castro exhibited the first signs of symbolic decision-making. As an anti-U.S. nationalist, Castro could not openly pursue normalization through standard diplomatic channels without losing his anti-imperialist reputation. Instead, he was obliged to communicate with the American government through informal proxies like Howard.

Howard's televised report resonated in Washington. After it aired, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Deputy Director Richard Helms reached out to the ABC journalist. Helms saw Howard's account as an opportunity to collect intelligence on the Cuban autocrat.⁴³ When Helms met Howard, the two pored over what Castro had said and its meaning for the future of U.S.-Cuban relations. Howard, who believed that Castro opened up to her because of her reputation as a "progressive," was adamant that Castro was ready to negotiate with the United States. Castro was in complete control of Cuban policy and—despite the opposition of communists around him like his brother Raúl and Guevara—Castro wanted to open discussions. However, Howard had a more important message for Helms. "Howard definitely wants to impress the U.S. Government with two facts," Helms wrote in a memorandum circulated to the CIA Director, U.S. Attorney General, and the National Security Advisor (NSA). "Castro is ready to discuss rapprochement and she herself is ready to discuss it with him if asked to do so by the U.S. Government."⁴⁴ If not her, Howard suggested sending other American representatives "progressive" enough to earn Castro's trust.⁴⁵

Based on their conversation, Helms came to a different conclusion about Castro and the situation in Cuba than Howard. Helms saw Castro as vulnerable and interpreted Castro's message

to mean that the embargo was working and that “Cuba is in a state of economic chaos.”⁴⁶ Helms began considering methods to assassinate Castro. Pressing Howard on Cuba’s power structure, Helms concluded that Castro was the ultimate authority in Cuba, and that “neither Guevara nor Raúl Castro would be able to rule Cuba if Fidel were assassinated.”⁴⁷ While Howard had stressed the possibility of rapprochement, the CIA was more concerned with the utility of U.S. embargos and assassinations.

A MOMENT OF FLEXIBILITY

In September 1963, William Hollingsworth Attwood was the United States’ Special Advisor on African Affairs to the United Nations.⁴⁸ Attwood, a former journalist, had also interviewed Fidel Castro in 1959 as Castro’s international profile was rising. In their discussion about U.S. policy and the Cuban revolution, Attwood came to a few important conclusions. First, he was convinced Castro was not a communist. Rather, over time, Castro developed his Marxist philosophy and fervent anti-Americanism due to U.S. covert action post-revolution. Second, because of the pronounced socioeconomic inequality of pre-revolutionary Cuba, American attempts to overthrow the revolution were bound to fail. For Cuba’s impoverished population, a government committed to social justice and economic empowerment trumped Cuba’s history of venal, kleptocratic regimes.⁴⁹ Finally, Attwood believed that the United States should treat Castro with “benign indifference,” halt covert activities in Cuba, and discuss normalization.⁵⁰ For his time, Attwood was progressive on matters of Cuban policy. Attwood’s personal experiences with Castro himself allowed his thinking to transcend the master narrative of the Cold War. To Attwood, Castro was an independent statesman, not a Soviet pawn.

That September, Howard’s article caught Attwood’s attention. In August, Attwood had met in New York with Seydon Diallo, the Guinean Ambassador to Cuba, whom Attwood had known while serving in the Guinean capital Conakry. Diallo told Attwood that Castro was “unhappy with Cuba’s satellite status and (was)

looking for a way out.”⁵¹ Diallo, who had a personal conversation with the Cuban premier, said that Castro was interested in moving toward non-alignment. If the United States could simply end the exile raids on Cuba, Castro would be amenable to discussions.⁵² Howard’s article helped confirm Diallo’s message and presented Attwood with a unique opportunity. He saw the prospect of talking with Castro once again, this time as a formal representative of the U.S. government. By 1963, Castro managed to reach the U.S. government with a message of peace through third party government officials and members of the press.

On September 12, 1963, Attwood arranged to meet Lisa Howard in New York City under the pretense of discussing contemporary African affairs. Without prompting from Attwood, Howard brought up her meeting with Castro. She then offered to organize a party at her Manhattan apartment for Attwood to informally meet Carlos Lechuga, Cuba’s U.N. representative, whom she had previously met in Havana. Lechuga served as Castro’s ambassador to Chile and Mexico and as a representative to the Organization of American States.⁵³ He also had a reputation as a moderate who would privately admit to holding suspicions about Marxism.⁵⁴ Attwood told Howard that he would consider the offer if she kept their conversation confidential. She agreed in exchange for exclusivity if a story came out of the meeting. Attwood was intrigued, writing later “this could be a moment of flexibility.”⁵⁵

That same day, Attwood discussed his findings with W. Averell Harriman, a Deputy Secretary of State, who asked him to write a memo detailing his thoughts. On September 17, Attwood talked again with Diallo in the Delegates Lounge. Diallo reiterated that Castro was amenable to a deal with the United States.⁵⁶ On September 18, Attwood met with his U.N. superior, Adlai Stevenson, and advocated for “discreet contact” with the Cubans at the U.N. to judge Castro’s interest in discussions. Stevenson cautioned Attwood that “the CIA (Special Group) is still in charge of Cuba,” but he offered to talk to Kennedy and suggested Attwood “pursue it quietly.”⁵⁷ The next day, Attwood met with Harriman in New York and showed him the memo. Harriman, sensitive to

the delicate nature of Attwood's proposal, told Attwood to discuss the matter with Robert F. Kennedy, the president's brother and the U.S. Attorney General.⁵⁸ While arranging a meeting with Robert Kennedy, Attwood heard from Stevenson, who had spoken with President Kennedy when he visited the United Nations that day. The president had approved Attwood to contact Lechuga, but was under strict orders to be "discreet."⁵⁹ Despite the informality of the discussions proposed by Attwood, the foreign policy bureaucracy still had to be maneuvered due to the sensitivity of the Cuban situation. Without approval from at least three different government superiors, Attwood was unable to officially make contact. Because of the importance of Cuba to U.S. foreign policy, administration officials were hesitant to advance too quickly.

With tentative approval, Attwood arranged with Howard to hold a cocktail party on September 23, 1963 at Howard's apartment on a tree-lined block of East 74th Street. On the day of the party, Howard approached Lechuga at the United Nations to invite him to the party. She said that some of Howard's friends who had been to Cuba would be in attendance. This group included William Attwood who urgently wanted to meet him.⁶⁰ Lechuga agreed to make an appearance that evening, and when he arrived at the party, Howard promptly pulled him aside.⁶¹ She told him that Attwood wanted to see him immediately and ushered him toward the living room where the U.S. official was waiting. After greeting each other, the two men established that both were talking as private citizens. Attwood then told Lechuga that he was leaving for Washington, D.C. in a matter of hours, but wanted to discuss a potential visit to Havana. "He said that the situation was abnormal and that the ice would have to be broken sometime," Lechuga remembered, calling Attwood "sincere."⁶² Attwood also told Lechuga that, in his personal opinion, U.S. assassination plots against Castro were futile because he was too popular to overthrow. Instead, more conciliatory policies were appropriate.⁶³

Attwood then brought up his diplomatic agenda by inquiring about the possibility of his making a visit to Cuba. Lechuga told Attwood that a trip might be a possibility and that Castro had been

intent on negotiations with Kennedy, but that the April 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion had derailed those plans.⁶⁴ Recently, Castro had liked the tone of Kennedy's speeches and had begun to think again about discussions. "At the time, I couldn't tell (Attwood) anything specific," Lechuga later wrote

But I said that my own view was that it would be difficult to negotiate in a situation of great pressure, such as there was in Cuba, with the economic blockade, the infiltration of saboteurs and the illegal flights. That atmosphere would have to be changed if the two parties were to discuss things on an equal footing, although, I repeated, everything would depend on what the United States wanted.⁶⁵

Attwood agreed that the negotiations would be complex. He also admitted that the political conditions were not ideal and would not change overnight because of the "prestige involved, but that discussions had to begin somewhere."⁶⁶ From Lechuga's description of U.S.-Cuban relations, it becomes apparent that the revolutionary government did want to consider rapprochement, but that hostile U.S. policies made any diplomacy nearly impossible.

Before the two men finished their discussion, Attwood revealed the president's gravest fear.⁶⁷ Lechuga recalls Attwood saying "that it wasn't easy for the Democrats to change course on Cuba, because the Republicans always had them on the defensive on the issue . . . Teasingly, he told me that if we thought Kennedy was our enemy, we should just imagine what Goldwater would do if he got to the White House."⁶⁸ Attwood knew that the symbolism of these negotiations was important for Kennedy's reelection bid in 1964. He continued saying that "people in the United States tended to see everything in terms of black and white, with no shadings."⁶⁹ Attwood's comments express the Kennedy administration's philosophy on the relationship between foreign policy and domestic politics. If Kennedy appeared to be "appeasing" Castro, his Republican rivals, like Barry Goldwater, could label him "weak," essentially scuttling his electability. Therefore, discussions would have to proceed with caution. Attwood told Lechuga that at the very least "an exchange of views might well be useful."⁷⁰ They would stay in touch

as Attwood maneuvered through the Washington bureaucracy.⁷¹

While Attwood began his efforts in New York, foreign policymakers in Washington, D.C. had already formulated a hardline anti-Castro policy. In a memorandum to the U.S. Congress on how to respond to constituent inquiries on U.S. policy toward Cuba, the White House took a militant position. The memo reads, “our objective is a truly free Cuba. . . . We want to get rid of Castro and the Communist influence there.”⁷² These goals included the withdrawal of Soviet military forces, the isolation of Castro, and aggravation of Cuba’s “serious economic difficulties.”⁷³ In the minds of U.S. policymakers, Cuba’s threat to U.S. interests was its affiliation with the Soviet Union. In the post-Missile Crisis era, United States’ policy revolved around preventing another nuclear standoff ninety miles off the Florida coast. Castro had become a liability not because of Cuban politics, but because of his role in a larger conflict between warring superpowers.

To accomplish its objectives, the United States utilized a two-prong policy prescription. According to the memo to Congress, first, the U.S. sought to weaken Cuba’s economy to precipitate Castro’s ultimate collapse at the hands of a disgruntled Cuban population. Second, the U.S. Department of State and the CIA worked to strengthen anti-communist regimes in the surrounding region in nations like Guatemala. Other internal White House documents reveal that the United States had provided financial and organizational support to counterrevolutionary exiles working to destabilize Castro’s government. These exile groups utilized terror tactics like destroying merchant vessels along Cuba’s shore and economic sabotage like bombing harbor facilities.⁷⁴ Today, it is also known that the CIA engaged in numerous covert operations in Cuba including Operation Mongoose, a program convened to assassinate Fidel Castro.⁷⁵

However, in the wake of the Cuban Missile Crisis and Castro’s resilience despite U.S. covert actions, Washington began to rethink its Cuban policy. Several weeks before Lisa Howard met Castro in Havana, Gordon Chase, a National Security Council (NSC) specialist on the Caribbean and Latin America, wrote an

options paper to National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy.⁷⁶ In the memo titled “Cuba--Policy,” Chase wrote that the United States had only focused on undermining Castro through covert and overt “nastiness.” In tandem with the “nasty” policies, Chase advised adding what he termed the “sweet approach.”⁷⁷ By creating a less militarized policy toward Castro, he argued, the United States could eliminate the two threats that he posed: Cuban “subversion” abroad (i.e. military support for insurgencies in countries like Colombia and Mozambique) and the reintroduction of Soviet nuclear warheads into the Caribbean. Chase notes that “our present nasty policy is probably a necessary prelude to a sweet approach,” and that using both tactics might be the most expedient.⁷⁸ However, under Chase’s policy paradigm, “enticing” Castro was still ultimately intended to eliminate the Cuban dictator. Chase’s memo shows that the White House was steadfast in its opposition to Castro, but nonetheless considered alternatives to open military confrontation. While the memo only represents a minor thawing of hostilities, it signals that the White House might have been genuinely receptive to Castro’s overtures.

Hours after Howard’s party, at the Department of Justice in Washington, D.C., Attwood and Robert Kennedy discussed Attwood’s memo and his conversation with Lechuga the previous evening. After hearing Attwood’s report, Kennedy told him that he would discuss it with McGeorge Bundy.⁷⁹ Kennedy feared that “it was bound to leak—and if nothing came of it the Republicans would call it appeasement and demand a congressional investigation.”⁸⁰ However, Kennedy approved maintaining contact with Lechuga and suggested Attwood propose a meeting in another location like Mexico or at the U.N. in New York.⁸¹

Three days later Attwood ran into Lechuga in the Delegates Lounge at the U.N.—a place Attwood said was “always a good place for discreet encounters because of its noise and confusion.”⁸² Lechuga was doing a television interview with Howard when Attwood entered. The two men greeted each other and Attwood related what he had heard at the Department of Justice. Under present circumstances, Attwood said he would be unable to travel

to Cuba because of his official government status. However, he said that “we were prepared to meet (Castro) and listen wherever else would be convenient” if Cuba was willing to send an emissary.⁸³ Lechuga said that he would discuss the matter with Castro and warned Attwood that he would be making a “hard” anti-American speech at the U.N. but that he should “not take it seriously.”⁸⁴ Attwood was not pleased, but Lechuga was adamant: as long as the U.S. blockade was in place, he had no choice.⁸⁵ Even though both the Cuban and United States governments privately acted with decorum, publically their statecraft was still critical and adversarial.

Nearly two weeks after Lechuga delivered an anti-U.S. address on the U.N. floor—to which Adlai Stevenson, the United States Ambassador to the U.N., acridly responded days later—Attwood was at a New York dinner hosted by Agnes Elizabeth Meyer, the widow of the late publisher of the *Washington Post*, Eugene Isaac Meyer. At dinner, Attwood talked with the Greek architect Constantinos Apostolou Doxiadis who had just returned from an architecture conference in Havana. C.A. Doxiadis, who had been in contact with Guevara and Castro, told Attwood that he was convinced that Castro wanted to normalize relations with the United States.⁸⁶ Attwood had now heard from four reliable sources that Castro’s interests were genuine. The possibility for rapprochement was a reality.⁸⁷ In this moment of informal diplomacy, the importance of third party messengers cannot be overstated. Castro communicated with the U.S. government through prominent private citizens like Howard and Doxiadis as well as diplomats like Seydon Diallo. Because none of these individuals had direct ties to the U.S. government they could pass messages without entangling themselves in the symbolic web of American electoral politics.

AN ALTERNATIVE PATH

Despite these positive steps toward negotiations, both Howard and Attwood were skeptical about Lechuga’s ability to transmit the United States’ message to Castro. In New York, Howard told Attwood that Lechuga’s message might not make it past the for-

eign office due to the anti-U.S. bloc's influence in the Cuban government. Instead of relying on Lechuga, Howard suggested contacting Dr. Rene Vallejo, Castro's closest advisor. Vallejo held no official position but was constantly at Castro's side acting as both a translator and secretary for the prime minister.⁸⁸ Howard had stayed in contact with Vallejo by phone since interviewing him in Havana, and believed he supported Castro's mission of peace. Through Vallejo, Howard could guarantee that "Castro knew there was a U.S. official available if he wanted to talk."⁸⁹ Howard's concerns reveal that Castro's control over Cuba was more tenuous than assumed by many scholars. Far from the totalitarian ruler of American nightmares, Castro's government was rife with dissent, exposing a level of fragility heretofore unrecognized. According to Howard, even Castro's own policymakers could not transmit messages without facing internal opposition to his dictates.⁹⁰ Finally, Lechuga's inability to access Castro points to a deeper concern with informal diplomacy, namely that messages can only travel as far as their bearer's influence extends.

At this point, in October 1963, Attwood approved Howard's plan to contact Vallejo with one condition. He wanted it made clear that "we were not soliciting a meeting but only expressing a willingness to listen to anything they had to say."⁹¹ Attwood came to understand that he operated on a symbolic minefield and that caution was a virtue. If the negotiations appeared too amicable or to have emanated from the U.S., they would be stigmatized as "appeasement" and become fodder for a Republican attack in the coming 1964 presidential election. Embedded in Attwood's concerns was the paradox of U.S. foreign policy toward Cuba. U.S. officials feared the symbolism of appearing to "appease" Castro, but could see the symbolic victory in removing Cuba from the Soviet sphere of influence. Public knowledge of discussions was anathema to their interest, but severing the Soviet-Cuban relationship was the ultimate prize.

Howard and Vallejo connected on October 29, 1963. Vallejo reassured Howard that "Castro still felt as he did in April about improving relations with (the United States)," but that Castro,

who wanted to conduct the discussions himself, could not leave the country at that time.⁹² Vallejo agreed to tell Castro that there was a U.S. official “authorized to listen to him.”⁹³ Three days later, Vallejo called Howard again with an alternative proposal that Attwood described in a memo:

He said Castro would very much like to talk to the U.S. official anytime and appreciated the importance of discretion to all concerned. Castro would therefore be willing to send a plane to Mexico to pick up the official and fly him to a private airport near Veradero [sic.] where Castro would talk to him alone. The plane would fly him back immediately after the talk. In this way there would be no risk of identification at Havana airport.⁹⁴

Howard informed Vallejo that this plan was not likely to be accepted by the United States. As an alternative, she suggested that a Castro spokesman meet a U.S. official in Mexico or at the U.N., believing the Americans would be more amenable to those conditions. Vallejo would not rule out such an alternative method.⁹⁵ The next day, Howard informed Attwood who then relayed the information to Chase, Attwood’s White House contact.⁹⁶ In the briefing, Chase and Attwood agreed that President Kennedy “could see the political advantage of possibly weaning Castro away from the Soviet fold,” even if the Department of State did not.⁹⁷ Attwood’s memoir reveals the disaggregated nature of foreign policy making in the U.S. government. Even within the executive branch, the president was only one voice out of many attempting to make disparate interests into a single, cohesive policy.

While Howard connected with Vallejo, Attwood ran into Lechuga in the U.N. Delegates Lounge on October 28, 1963. Lechuga told Attwood that Havana did not want to engage in formal talks at the U.N.⁹⁸ Despite these reservations, Lechuga suggested that “informal chats from time to time” would be acceptable and that he was still open to having a U.S. official like Attwood visit Castro in Cuba.⁹⁹ Attwood agreed to keep their channels of communication open and told Lechuga it was his prerogative to reinitiate a conversation. While contact continued, the negotiations had momentarily stalled due to a disagreement over location.

By late 1963, the Kennedy White House had to decide Attwood's next assignment. On November 5, McGeorge Bundy informed President Kennedy of Attwood's work and his standing invitation to travel to Cuba. As his top national security advisor, Bundy told the president that "it's as good a place as any for covert contact" and that Attwood would be able to move forward with negotiations easily because of his established relationship with Castro.¹⁰⁰ Even so, Bundy was particularly worried about Attwood's "close" relationship with the White House and the potential for Attwood's involvement becoming politically dangerous. Bundy offered to stall the talks and remove Attwood from the U.S. payroll for deniability purposes. Kennedy agreed that separating him from the payroll was an appropriate solution. However, Kennedy expressed to Bundy that, "I'd, we'd, need some explanation for why Attwood's there" if the press heard about it.¹⁰¹ Bundy believed that the White House should prepare a hypothetical cover story that it had simply responded to a Cuban initiative "to see what the terms and conditions surrendered were." Kennedy agreed and asked Bundy "if he were off the payroll is there any hesitation in going to Cuba?"¹⁰² Bundy needed to clear it with the White House Counsel and the "newsman" first, but appeared comfortable with the possibility. This meeting shows that Kennedy and Bundy were serious about opening up negotiations with Cuba provided that public perception was controlled. They discussed at length the importance of contingency plans, secrecy, and plausible deniability. Indeed, how to distance themselves from Attwood if the negotiations were to leak to the press appears to have been Kennedy's paramount fear in approving informal negotiations.¹⁰³

On November 12, Howard told Attwood that Vallejo had called again. This time Vallejo suggested that Attwood come to Varadero, Cuba on a U.S. plane leaving from Key West, Florida. He argued that this scenario would attract less attention than a Cuban plane entering American airspace. Attwood deferred to Bundy on how to proceed. In a phone conversation, Bundy told Attwood that the president still only approved preliminary agenda discussions outside of Cuba. In the meantime, Bundy wrote, in a

memorandum for the record, that Attwood should make it clear to Vallejo that Cuba had two policies

Which are flatly unacceptable to us: namely, . . . (1) submission to external Communist influence, and (2) a determined campaign of subversion directed at the rest of the Hemisphere [sic]. Reversal of these policies may or may not be sufficient to produce a change in the policy of the United States, but they are certainly necessary, and without an indication of readiness to move in these directions, it is hard for us to see what could be accomplished by a visit to Cuba.¹⁰⁴

Bundy stressed one more point. Attwood was to make it his priority to reinforce that the United States was neither a “supplicant” nor had it initiated the contact.¹⁰⁵ Bundy, like Attwood, knew the importance of perception. The ultimate fate of the negotiations did not depend on the substance, rather it hinged on the ability of the U.S. government to frame the public narrative.

Bundy’s message addressed negotiations, but took a militant stance. The closer to the president U.S. officials were, the warier of appeasement they appeared in their language. Strong demands, in other words, took the place of unilateral concessions or expressions of friendship in these initial messages from the United States. Moreover, Bundy’s message to Vallejo through Attwood reveals that the process of agreeing on the terms of an initial discussion involved a transmission of substantive diplomacy. Even as the details of a rapprochement remained in doubt, Bundy, Attwood, Vallejo, and Castro all exchanged ideas, terms of negotiation, and other diplomatic information. Indeed, informal diplomacy opened an initial dialogue without the formal trappings of a well-orchestrated, formal meeting.

Because Kennedy was still uncomfortable sending a U.S. official to Cuba, Vallejo decided to accept Attwood’s earlier compromise. In a phone conversation, Vallejo said that Castro would send Lechuga instructions on how to proceed with formulating an agenda with Attwood at the U.N. These talks would pave the way for later, formal diplomatic talks about normalization, Vallejo said. Calling Bundy later that morning, Attwood informed him that the

agenda negotiations were within reach. Attwood was instructed to return to Washington in order to discuss the U.S. message to Castro.

In late November 1963, the respective governments of Kennedy and Castro were on the verge of breaking an icy two-year diplomatic silence. At this particular moment in 1963, meaningful diplomatic discussions, however informal, were only days away. While the outcome of the agenda discussions remained in doubt, the process of normalization had begun. Castro and Kennedy had found an informal, symbolically acceptable location and a pair of negotiators for moving towards a normal diplomatic relationship.

A FRENCH MESSENGER OF PEACE

French journalist Jean Daniel also found himself at the center of a vague, indirect diplomatic exchange between the two adversarial states. On October 3, 1963 Attwood had lunch in New York with Daniel, an old friend and editor for the French newsweekly *L'Observateur*. The two men chatted and Daniel told Attwood that he was soon to depart for Havana where he planned to interview Castro. Intrigued by the possibility of Daniel acting as another unconventional diplomatic conduit, Attwood suggested that Daniel see President Kennedy before departing for Havana. That day, Attwood called his friend Ben Bradlee, *Newsweek's* Washington bureau chief at the time.¹⁰⁶ After covering the 1960 presidential campaign, Bradlee was a close acquaintance of the president and visited the White House regularly.¹⁰⁷ Bradlee discussed the matter with President Kennedy who agreed to see Daniel.

A meeting took place between Kennedy and Daniel in the late afternoon on Thursday, October 24, 1963 during which Kennedy shocked Daniel with his understanding of the Cuban situation.¹⁰⁸ After a few minutes of pleasantries, Kennedy told Daniel that:

I believe there is no country in the world . . . where economic colonization, humiliation and exploitation were worse than in Cuba, in part owing to my country's policies during the [Fulgencio] Batista regime. I believe that we created, built and manufac-

tured the Castro movement out of whole cloth and without realizing it. . . . I can assure you that I have understood the Cubans. I approved the proclamation which Fidel Castro made in the Sierra Maestra, when he justifiably called for justice and especially yearning to rid Cuba of corruption. I will go even further: to some extent it is as though Batista was the incarnation of a number of sins on the part of the United States. Now we shall have to pay for those sins.¹⁰⁹

Kennedy, however, continued, arguing that:

It is also clear that the problem has ceased to be a Cuban one, and has become international. . . . I know that Castro betrayed the promises made in the Sierra Maestra, and that he has agreed to be a Soviet agent in Latin America. I know that through his fault—either his ‘will to independence,’ his madness or Communism—the world was on the verge of nuclear war in October, 1962. . . . In any case, the nations of Latin America are not going to attain justice and progress that way, I mean through Communist subversion.¹¹⁰

Reflecting on the meeting, Daniel later wrote that he believed the president was looking for a way out of the stagnant diplomatic relationship with Cuba.¹¹¹ A socialist who felt sympathetic to the Cubans suffering under the U.S. embargo, Daniel knew he had a mission to help open a dialogue between Castro and Kennedy.¹¹²

It is clear from this conversation that President Kennedy had a more sympathetic and sophisticated understanding of the Cuban situation than the content of his public speeches exposed. With Daniel, the president spoke with maturity, frankness, and historical insight. Nonetheless, the president remained committed to his cold warrior public persona: Cuba was a Soviet proxy, and he would not negotiate with Khrushchev’s Third World acolytes. In fact, Kennedy’s treatment of Castro was patronizing and confrontational despite his more conciliatory sentiments toward the revolution’s origins.

Daniel left for Havana days later. Arriving in the Cuban capital, he talked with farmers, intellectuals, counter-revolutionaries, ambassadors, and government ministers. But Castro proved elusive. For three weeks, Daniel sought the prime minister without

finding him. A government official finally told him that Castro's workload was so heavy due to a recent hurricane that the Cuban leader would not be able to speak with journalists. Disappointed, Daniel was poised to fly to Mexico the next day when Castro arrived at his hotel. The prime minister had heard about Daniel's interview with President Kennedy and immediately sought out the French journalist.¹¹³

The two men spoke at length throughout the evening of November 18, 1963, the same night that Attwood and Vallejo agreed on an introductory agenda discussion. Daniel described his conversation with President Kennedy and claims that he expected Castro to react critically. However, he was surprised that Castro took Kennedy's words at face value. After a pause, Castro said, "I believe Kennedy is sincere."

I also believe that today the expression of this sincerity could have political significance. . . . I haven't forgotten that Kennedy centered his electoral campaign against Nixon on the theme of firmness toward Cuba. I have not forgotten the Machiavellian tactics and the equivocation, the attempts at invasion, the pressures, the blackmail, the organization of a counter-revolution, the blockade, and above everything, all the retaliatory measures which were imposed before, long before there was the pretext and alibi of Communism. But I feel that he inherited a difficult situation; I don't think that a President of the United States is ever really free, and I believe Kennedy is at present feeling the impact of this lack of freedom. . . . I also think he is a realist: he is now registering that it is impossible to simply wave a wand and cause us, and the explosive situation throughout Latin America, to disappear.¹¹⁴

He told Daniel that he was a "peace lover" who wanted the United States to acknowledge the existence of socialism in Latin America and learn to coexist. To do so would take political fortitude on the part of the U.S. president, but it would be a welcome change in policy. Finally, according to Daniel, Castro gave his message to be carried back to Kennedy:

Really, it seems to me that a man like Kennedy is capable of seeing that it is not in the United States' interest to pursue a policy

which can lead only to a stalemate. So far as we are concerned, everything can be restored to normalcy on the basis of mutual respect of sovereignty. . . . Since you are going to see Kennedy again, be an emissary of peace, despite everything. I want to make myself clear: I don't want anything, I don't expect anything, and as a revolutionary the present situation does not displease me. But as a man and a statesman, it is my duty to indicate what the bases of understanding could be.¹¹⁵

If Kennedy were able to accomplish this change in philosophy, he would be a greater president than Abraham Lincoln, Castro concluded.¹¹⁶ However, Castro was convinced that Kennedy could not negotiate until after his 1964 re-election campaign. According to Daniel's account of the meeting, Castro appeared thoughtful, tense, but cordial.¹¹⁷ Afterwards, Castro had the French journalist stay in Cuba to continue their discussion.

Substantively, the messages of both Castro and Kennedy were both peaceful and progressive. Both leaders' language provides evidence that they genuinely sought normalization. However, Kennedy had to contend with the importance of his relationship to the voting public. Embedded within his anti-Soviet message to Castro is this public perception imperative. While rapprochement may have appeared expedient in private, the looming shadow of the U.S. presidential election and American fears of foreign communism presented difficult roadblocks to peace.

THE DEATH OF A PRESIDENT

Earlier the same day, Air Force One landed at Miami International Airport with President Kennedy on board. At the end of a three-day speaking tour through Florida, Kennedy had one last stop to make in Miami.¹¹⁸ On the campaign trail, Kennedy had a comfortable sixteen-point lead among moderates—who many believed would be pivotal in 1964—over the presumptive Republican nominee, Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater.¹¹⁹ After arriving from Tampa where he had addressed union leaders and the chamber of commerce, Kennedy gave a speech to the Inter-American Press As-

sociation, which would be broadcast in Cuba.¹²⁰ That night, the president discussed his broader vision for Latin America. Kennedy told the congregated journalists that “the hard reality of life in much of Latin America, will not be solved simply by complaining about Castro, by blaming all problems on communism, or generals, or nationalism.”¹²¹ Rather, Kennedy argued, issues like low adult literacy and life expectancy, poverty, and stagnant incomes could be overcome with development programs. Kennedy portrayed the hemisphere’s issues as conquerable with the right influx of capital, commitment from developed nations, and political democracy. Finally, Kennedy had a direct message about Castro.

. . . A small band of conspirators has . . . made Cuba a victim of foreign imperialism, an instrument of the policy of others, [and] a weapon in an effort dictated by external powers to subvert the other American republics. This, and this alone divides us. As long as this is true, nothing is possible. Without it, everything is possible. Once this barrier is removed, we will be ready and anxious to work with the Cuban people in pursuit of those progressive goals which a few short years ago stirred their hopes and the sympathy of many people throughout the Hemisphere.¹²²

Kennedy’s speech struck a peaceful note, but perpetuated the same Soviet proxy argument that Dillon had laid out two years before in Uruguay. In public, the president was unwilling to acknowledge Castro’s independence or the possibility of rapprochement. Ending his speech to applause, Kennedy flew back to Washington. He would only have two days before flying to Texas for a planned tour of four cities, including Dallas.¹²³

On November 22, 1963, Jean Daniel and Castro sat eating lunch at the premier’s Varadero beach home on the Cuban north shore. While conversing in the living room, a secretary dressed in a taupe military uniform told Castro that Osvaldo Dorticós, the President of the Cuban Republic, was on the phone and needed to talk with Castro. The prime minister went to the phone, listened, and then announced to the room that Kennedy had been shot in Dallas. Finding out all he could, Castro returned to his seat and said three times “es una mala noticia” (“this is bad news”). The rest

of the day, Castro stayed close to a radio tuned to the NBC network broadcasting from Miami. That night, Kennedy was pronounced dead, at which point Castro remarked, “everything has changed. . . . All will have to be rethought.”¹²⁴ A few days later, Daniel returned to the United States. He was convinced that Castro still wanted rapprochement. Attwood called Arthur M. Schlesinger, a White House aide, and the National Security Council’s Gordon Chase to arrange an appointment for Daniel and Bundy.¹²⁵ It is unclear whether this meeting ever occurred.¹²⁶ With Kennedy dead, the negotiations would have to be re-thought by a new U.S. president.

JOHNSON RISES TO POWER

According to Attwood, the United States began to let the negotiations during Johnson’s presidency. In a memorandum to Bundy shortly after Kennedy’s assassination, Chase laid out the United States’ options in the new international and domestic political climate. He wrote that if Bundy and Johnson believed the chances of normalization had diminished since Kennedy’s assassination, then Attwood’s discussions were moot. However, he advised Bundy to continue to pursue negotiations, but cautiously. “While November 22 events probably make accommodation an even tougher issue for President Johnson than it was for President Kennedy,” Chase wrote,

A preliminary Attwood-Lechuga talk still seems worthwhile from our point of view – if the Cubans initiate it. We have little or nothing to lose and there will be some benefits; at a minimum, we should get a valuable reading as to what Castro regards as negotiable . . . and a hint as to how he views the effects of November 22 on Cuban/U.S. relations.¹²⁷

Chase then urged that the president make a decision quickly, citing Adlai Stevenson’s “activist tendencies” and his willingness to act without White House approval.

Nonetheless, Chase was acutely aware of the nearly unconquerable obstacles between the United States and Cuba. In the aforementioned memo, Chase wrote that “a new President [sic.]

who has no background of being successfully aggressive toward Castro and the communists (e.g. President Kennedy in October, 1962) would probably run a greater risk of being accused, by the American people, of 'going soft.'¹²⁸ Chase knew that while Kennedy established his cold warrior bona fides by militantly opposing Castro, Johnson had yet to establish his credentials amongst the electorate, the media, and his partisan opponents. Indeed, Chase's memo encapsulates the essence of the presidential foreign policy drama: in which rational foreign policy decisions were subject to a series of symbolic assessments. Regardless of American interest abroad, a president's foreign policy decision-making process was minimized without a national reputation of virile strength.

On November 29, 1963, having not heard from the White House, Attwood told Howard—who was scheduled to call Lechuga that day—that he had no new instructions.¹²⁹ On December 2, 1963, Lechuga let Attwood know that he had received authorization from Vallejo to talk "in general terms" and asked if Attwood had heard from the White House. He had not. Two days later, Lechuga told Attwood that he had received a letter with Castro's instructions for an initial agenda dialogue. Attwood called Chase again who, on the verge of a substantive discussion with the Cubans, delivered the coup de grâce. All policies were under review, be patient.¹³⁰ On December 12, Attwood and Lechuga spoke again, with Attwood left with no choice but to echo Chase: be patient. The brief conversation was the last the two men had for many years.¹³¹

That same week, President Johnson reassured the General Assembly of the United Nations that he would be carrying on Kennedy's foreign policy. Afterward, Johnson approached Attwood and told him that he had read "with interest" a memorandum Attwood had written about his work with Lechuga and Vallejo.¹³² Somewhat relieved, Attwood did not believe Johnson would terminate the talks. The United States had too much to gain, and he was on the brink of discussing substance with Lechuga. At the time, Attwood did not know that the first words Johnson uttered as president about Cuba were to John McCone, Director of the Cen-

tral Intelligence Agency (CIA), asking how he planned to “dispose of Castro.”¹³³ The president was more concerned with Vietnam, his bold domestic policy ambitions, and the potential electoral disaster represented by a failure to normalize with Cuba gracefully. Even with majorities in both chambers of Congress, the potential for failure left Johnson unwilling to approve negotiations.

A FLICKER OF HOPE

After a long period of internal White House silence, Adlai Stevenson, in an attempt to revive the negotiations, laid out the basic chronology of events that transpired under his leadership at the United Nations in a memorandum to President Johnson. In conclusion, Stevenson wrote:

While I am not sanguine that anything will come of this, (Howard) is convinced that (Castro) sincerely wants some channel of communication. If it could be resumed on a low enough level to avoid any possible embarrassment, it might be worth considering. I am sure it cannot be done through the usual channels.¹³⁴

Like Lechuga and Attwood before him, Stevenson knew that the greatest impediment to negotiation was public perception.

The last attempt at negotiation came from Fidel Castro. On February 12, 1964, Howard returned to Havana to film another ABC special. Once again, she had a conversation with Castro who sent a direct message to President Johnson. The Cuban premier spoke with unprecedented directness. In his message, Castro said that there “are no [sic.] areas of contention between us that cannot be discussed and settled.” Continuing, Castro commended the “political courage” the U.S. had shown in initiating these discussions and expressed his interest in continuing based on the agenda he had transmitted to Lechuga. Castro also offered Johnson a defensive political option.

If the President feels it necessary during the [Presidential] campaign to make bellicose statements about Cuba or even to take some hostile action – if he will inform me, unofficially, that a specific action is required because of domestic political consid-

erations, I shall understand and not take any serious retaliatory action.¹³⁵

Castro finished his message with an oath of silence: “I have revealed nothing at that time. . . . I have revealed nothing since . . . I would reveal nothing now.”¹³⁶ If Johnson needed reassurance that he had a willing partner in negotiations, Castro’s message should have assuaged any such concerns.

However, Johnson had to contend with Barry Goldwater. Emboldened by his Republican frontrunner status, Goldwater—who was already on the record saying that Cuba was “a cancer eating away at the security of the entire hemisphere”—took a militant stance in criticizing Johnson’s handling of the Caribbean nation.¹³⁷ In front of 3,000 supporters in Chicago, Illinois, Goldwater said that Johnson “may talk our security to death:”

How long can this administration hide its head in the sand and say that we have to get along with communism in this world? Today we do not have brinkmanship. We have backmanship and we do business with murderers who would destroy us.¹³⁸

Goldwater advocated tightening the embargo, dispatching Marines to Cuba, and training an exile paramilitary force for another invasion.¹³⁹ Goldwater’s rhetorical war against Johnson jeopardized the presidential incumbent less than a year after Johnson took office.

The last time that negotiations were discussed was July 7, 1964. In a memorandum to McGeorge Bundy, Gordon Chase wrote that while he was “in favor of having a channel to Castro,” Lisa Howard had become a liability. Her role as a journalist made the White House uneasy. As Chase wrote, by removing Howard he would feel “somewhat safer,” because Adlai Stevenson, her new contact since Attwood’s redeployment as U.S. Ambassador to Kenya, was a “far sexier” contact from “a public media point of view” than Attwood.¹⁴⁰ Once again, Chase clearly exposes the United States’ cardinal concern with Cuban negotiations. Because of the symbolic power of Cuba as an enemy of the state, any press story about negotiation could lead to the label of “softness” and appeasement, which

was anathema to Johnson's nascent presidency. Moreover, these justifications were made in the language of performance. Stevenson, a trustworthy and nationally important political surrogate, was too "sexy" to be caught negotiating with Castro publically.¹⁴¹ Despite the real benefits of communication, it was the powerful importance of image that trumped all other considerations.

With Howard's eventual removal, communication between the two states essentially ended. Although Castro attempted to reach out to the United States through an interview with *The New York Times*' Richard Eder, and Howard arranged for Guevara to meet with U.S. Senator Eugene McCarthy in New York, negotiations had largely fallen apart in Attwood's absence.¹⁴² While Johnson ended the CIA covert assassination plots in Cuba that year, his attention was largely turned to Vietnam and, as a result, the work done by Attwood, Howard, Chase, Lechuga, and Vallejo was largely forgotten.

CONCLUSION

As the Castro-Kennedy conversations receded into history, the potential for U.S.-Cuban peace disappeared as well. While Henry Kissinger under President Gerald Ford attempted to normalize relations—and President Jimmy Carter momentarily did—no U.S. president was able to create a robust peace with Castro that transcended the Cold War and the centuries of patron-client relations.¹⁴³ Despite this diplomatic disappointment, numerous lessons can be gleaned from the wreckage of what Attwood once called "an episode in American foreign policy best described as a comedy of errors that wasn't always very funny."¹⁴⁴

Most saliently, the Johnson administration's failure to reach rapprochement stems from the cult of the cold warrior that each president aspired to emulate. Because of electoral pressure and domestic perception, no U.S. president could afford to be perceived as weak on communism. In a world where capitalist democracy was believed to be under communist siege, battlegrounds like Cuba took on greater importance in this symbolic scramble for legitimacy.

Thus, successive U.S. presidents perpetuated aggressive, militarized foreign policy doctrines—what Greg Grandin calls “muscular internationalism”—to prove their anti-communist qualifications.¹⁴⁵ Johnson was unable to pursue a durable peace with Castro because he had not demonstrated to the electorate that he was a cold warrior with masculine, militarist qualifications. This White House dogma was so overwhelming that presidents were willing to disregard the sage advice of their foreign policy advisers. Fear drove these leaders toward timid policies. Therefore, rapprochement would have necessitated either a long-tenured U.S. commander-in-chief with a warrior-president persona, or one whose political philosophy transcended the Cold War power calculus and its psychological side effects. At its essence, the aesthetic dangers of normalization were the greatest impediment to negotiation. This symbolic battlefield proves that U.S. presidents do not have ultimate authority over foreign policy. In many ways, they are politically feeble—captive to their own political ascendancy. To paraphrase Fidel Castro himself, no U.S. president was ever truly free to make his own decisions.¹⁴⁶

Moreover, the Cuban Revolution was wildly popular within Cuba itself. Built on a platform of anti-Americanism, nationalist sentiments underwrote Castro’s budding political power. Therefore, to reach a rapprochement or admit to initiating discussions with the United States would embolden the dissenting elements in his own government and undermine his authority as an exemplar of nationalist pride. The symbolic trap of the Cold War left both sides subject to its symbolic requirements. However, time and again, the Cuban premier transparently expressed interest and made unilateral gestures. Castro, in this narrative, is not a capricious dictator, but a rational statesman in pursuit of peace.

Furthermore, these failed negotiations expose informal diplomacy’s power and limits. Unbridled by the dictates of elected office, mid-level government officials and journalists proved to be powerful negotiation surrogates for the United States and Cuba. In the U.S. government’s neurotic attempts to avoid the large-scale embarrassment of appearing to “appease” Castro, informal diplomacy offered an ideal method to disassociate with the prime participants

in the case of failure. Officials, like William Attwood, who held little political relevance, yet were connected with both the government and the press became integral to the process. Attwood especially could thrive in the liminal spaces between the government and the press, having worked in both professions. He could move seamlessly between his contacts in Cuba, the White House, and the United Nations without ruffling the hypersensitive feathers of figureheads like McGeorge Bundy or Adlai Stevenson. Howard played a similar role as intermediary. She was both an interloper and insider in all social and political circles. Through diplomatic sessions over cocktails, chance encounters in the chaotic halls of the U.N., furtive international phone calls, and early morning interviews in Havana, the White House and Castro found a system of clandestine contact by which low-level discussions could resonate up to the highest offices.

However, these failed negotiations also exhibit informal diplomacy's greatest weakness: its precarious, unofficial status. Informal diplomacy may avoid the risk of political scandal and symbolic setback, but its characteristic discretion makes it easily derailed by innuendo or political whim. With a change of the president or even a single intra-agency promotion, the delicate web of personal relations and trust that support informal diplomacy can collapse. Howard and Attwood's diplomatic channels were at the mercy of a handful of capricious, anti-communist officials. Similarly, Castro and his personal perception of the U.S. president controlled Lechuga and Vallejo. Indeed, the fact that informal diplomacy requires an unwavering champion is both its paramount strength as well as its tragic flaw.

It is also clear from this moment that different bureaucratic self-interests affect and distort foreign policy. Each government institution—the CIA, U.N., State Department, Department of Justice, and National Security Council—has a *raison d'être*. For example, the CIA evolved into a covert operations clearinghouse while the United Nations was chartered as an instrument of international communication and deliberation. Naturally, in dealing with foreign policy dilemmas, each department approached policy

questions based on its functional responsibility. Hence, the CIA's Richard Helms perceived weakness in Castro's message and advocated for more covert operations to undermine his regime. On the other hand, United Nation officials like Attwood and Stevenson believed that open communication could yield amicable relations. Also, because all government departments are subject to a prerogative of power, each sought to turn their ideas into policy. These functional discrepancies create a maddening array of interests and conclusions that can cloud proper presidential decision-making.

As this paper has shown, throughout the period from 1961 to 1964, there was a sincere U.S. effort to open up diplomatic relations with Fidel Castro's Cuba. Out of Kennedy's approval of unconditional agenda discussions, one can infer genuine interest on the part of the United States government. While cynical scholars may claim that Kennedy's motives were Machiavellian and only intended to provide valuable information to the CIA, this paper's research strongly suggests that the Kennedy administration wanted durable peace. Whether these efforts "failed" or were never an authentic possibility may never be known; the entire affair is a lesson in historical contingency. Regardless of intention, the unpredictability of a complicated, capricious world can always intercede in both war and diplomacy.

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48 There is debate as to whether or not Attwood read Lisa Howard's article on September 5 or September 12. While in his book *The Twilight Struggle*, Attwood writes that he talked to Howard on September 5, in his memorandum he writes that he read her article on the 5th and met her on the 12th. Since Attwood wrote the memo a few weeks after the event while his memoir was published twenty-four years later, this paper will conclude that his memorandum was correct and that Attwood read Howard's article on the 5th and met her on the 12th.

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53 According to the *The New York Times*, Carlos Lechuga was the son of a wealthy Havana law clerk and a member of the "country-club set." He was rumored to have made a fortune winning government contracts for construction projects under the revolutionary government. "Cuba's Voice at the U.N. Carlos Manuel Lechuga Hevia," *The New York Times*, November 15, 1962, pg. 5.

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