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P R O C E E D I N G S

AMBASSADOR HUDDLESTON: Good morning. I'm really delighted to see all of you here today. I see a lot of old friends in the audience.

I also am delighted to welcome Betsy Taylor, the spouse of Jay Taylor, and my mother, Dwayne Latham, who has come all the way from Sedona, Arizona.

Seeing so many of you here today indicates how much we're interested in Cuba, and how we would like to see the Cuban-U.S. relationship better than it is today.

And with us today we have the best experts who were in Cuba during a 25-year span of Republican and Democratic administrations, and are all career officers.

But before I turn it over to them, I'd like to tell you a little story about my experience in Cuba.

Toward the end of my tour in Cuba I was driving the Principal Officer's car. And, by the way, in Cuba they often call us "the Chief," the Chief of the United States Interests Section. And they call the Interests Section "USINT." So the Chief of the USINT, which is us -- and, in this case, myself -- I was driving this beautiful black Crown Victoria that's often driven by the chauffeur for the Principal Officer.

But in this case, it was a sultry Saturday afternoon, and I decided that I'd go into work at USINT. And USINT, by the way, is our old embassy, as most of you here know. It was renovated in the mid-'90s when Alan Flanigan was there.

As I drove down toward the Interests Section on Quinta Avenida, which is the most beautiful avenue in Havana, it goes through the old residential section, beautiful trees and old mansions, lots of people, as usual, were along the road trying to get a ride.

I saw this group of kids, and I stopped. These kids jumped in the car. There must have been six or seven of them. And they kind of leaned back in the air-conditioning, because no cars in Cuba are air-conditioned. Even the little Ladas used by the Cuban hierarchy are not air-conditioned. And the cars that the Cubans usually ride in are the old '50s clunkers, which we think are very romantic, from Detroit.

Anyway, one of the kids said, "Where did you get this car?" And I said, "Oh, well, this car is the property of the United States government." And someone said, "And what do you do?" I said, "Well, I'm the Chief of USINT."

And there was a pregnant pause there for a minute, and then this girl leaned over from the back seat and she said, "Be our mother. Take us to Miami."

I think the reason that all of us are here this morning is because we would like to see a future for Cuba's young people, for those young people, not in Miami but in Havana, Cuba. This relationship that we have with Cuba, if it were the right one, might be able to influence positively that outcome.

Now, we have not talked to each other about what we're going to say, because it's my hope that you're going to see from this panel common themes about our relationship with Cuba. And maybe we're going to discover through this panel how we might conduct a future relationship with Cuba.

Each of us will speak for 10 minutes, and then we will open the session for questions and answers.

First of all, let me begin by introducing Wayne Smith, who was our USINT Chief from 1979 through 1982.

Wayne came by way of Peking, where he was the Political Counselor. And Wayne actually has made Cuba a career. He wrote *Best of Enemies*, which very much encapsulates how we feel about Cuba. He is now Director of the Cuba Project at the Center for International Policy.

So -- Wayne, we can't wait to hear from you. Get us started.

MR. SMITH: Well, thank you very much, Vicki.

I think the title of my presentation should be “The Beginning of Disillusionment.”

I had waited -- I was in the embassy, it was my first post. I arrived in Cuba in July of 1958, and was there during the civil war. I was there until we broke relations in January of 1961. And as we sailed out of the harbor the night of January the 4th, I vowed I’d be with the first group of American diplomats back in -- because I had come to have a feel for the place.

I had to push all kinds of buttons, but I did make it. I was with the first group back in and became Director of Cuban Affairs from ‘77 to ‘79, and then returned to Cuba in ‘79 as the Chief of Mission.

The disillusionment begins, however, before I had returned to Cuba.

We opened Interests Section in one another’s capitals in September of 1977. Ramon Sanchez-Parodi was the Chief of the Cuban Interests Section. I was Director of Cuban Affairs. And the two of us began to discuss how we would handle the two issues that had to be solved first.

Number one, compensation for nationalized U.S. properties. We couldn’t move forward without that. And number two,

on their side, a lifting of the U.S. embargo. But we agreed we weren't going to lift the embargo until we had compensation for our properties, and they weren't going to compensate until they were assured that we would lift the embargo. So we'd have to negotiate the two things simultaneously and announce agreement.

However, it is September, October that we're discussing this. On November 16th, I was coming back from giving a talk at William and Mary and I hear on the car radio that a top government official has just said that because of a recent and dramatic buildup in Soviet troop strength in Cuba, the normalization process is now virtually impossible. It will be at a standstill.

What is this?

I get back to the State Department. I have a call waiting for me from Todman, the Assistant Secretary. I go up. He's furious, and asked why I cleared this statement without consulting with him. I said, "I didn't clear the statement."

We called the Secretary's office. He hadn't cleared it either. This is Brzezinski, who gives the statement on his own on November the 16th, 17th, without clearing with anyone, on the basis of a two-page CIA estimate, which I think he has asked for. One page shows you a map where the countries are. The second is just a list,

and shows the CIA, the new CIA estimate about how many troops are there. It's not that there are any new troops, it's just that they've revised upwards, somewhat, their estimate, guesstimate, as to how many are there.

And on the basis of that, he gives the statement saying that the process is, for all practical purposes, at a standstill.

Well, you can't get around that. So the Cubans asked where we came up with this? Well, we didn't really have an answer.

So the whole process was, if anything, put on hold. We continued to talk and so forth, but the idea of negotiating these issues went by the boards.

Then, just as I was going to Havana to become Chief of the Interests Section, the Soviet brigade issue came up -- unfortunately just before the non-aligned summit in September of 1979.

What was this? The CIA, or the intelligence community, has changed slightly their statement regarding Soviet troop strength in Cuba. We've been saying for years that there are 3,000 to 5,000 Soviet troops in Cuba, mostly in an advisory capacity.

They now hear some new radio messages using the word "brigade." And they factor in that there is now a Soviet brigade in Cuba. It's not new. It hasn't recently arrived. It's been there. But the powers

that be -- it gets to Senator Church, who gives a statement -- he calls [Secretary of State] Vance. Vance says making a statement wouldn't be helpful, but it's up to you to decide, thinking then Church won't do it.

That's a go-ahead to Church, and he gives the statement, saying that it is unacceptable to have a Soviet brigade in Cuba -- never mind that it's been there for years.

Vance and [President] Carter then take up that call. They make statements to the effect that the situation as it is will have to be changed. It's unacceptable.

I went back with a cable -- I'm now in Havana -- saying, "The situation isn't going to be changed." The Cubans have just held this non-aligned summit, which has been very useful to the Soviets, and even if the Soviets were willing to change -- they were sometimes more flexible than the Cubans -- the Cubans would not be. And so we're digging ourselves into a corner saying the status quo is unacceptable.

And, further, there's no reason the status quo isn't acceptable. This unit has been there all along for training purposes with the Cubans. It's no threat to us. We're making a big thing of it, but we shouldn't.

It's too late. The brigade stayed.

The third thing -- Mariel. Briefly, there were growing pressures because of all these Cuban Americans' returning to Cuba and talking about the great life up in Miami -- growing pressures for Cubans to get visas and go to the States. They started stealing boats.

The Cubans came to us several times -- came to me as the Chief of the Interests Section -- to suggest we had to negotiate this. We weren't giving any immigrant visas in the Interests Section, and very few non-immigrant visas, and yet there's a lot of pressure for people to leave. We had to negotiate and find some way, some normal channel for them to leave under acceptable circumstances.

And I, on each occasion, set up a cable suggesting that we really should do this, we should negotiate.

I never got an answer to any of those cables. Not a single one. I guess the answer was "fine, if it's bothering them, then so much the better. We don't need to negotiate."

So Mariel happens. I won't go into all that because I want to have one minute to get to the reason that led me led me down the path of leaving the Foreign Service. I sent in a cable in the spring of 1982 asking to be removed from the post and given a job unrelated to policy until such time as I could take early retirement.

Why did I do that? The first reason -- I didn't know this, but in November of 1981, Carlos Rafael Rodriguez, a Cuban vice president, has met with [Secretary of State] Haig in Mexico City at the insistence of the Mexicans. He doesn't want to meet, but they say, "You must." So he does. I'm told about this later.

Carlos Rafael Rodriguez' question is: why is it so difficult to get some kind of a dialogue started? I thought that's why we were beginning to engage? That's why we opened Interests Sections. But there isn't any dialogue going on.

And Haig's response was: well, we want to see. We're not interested in words, we're not interested in "indications" that you're willing to meet us halfway, we want to see actions on your part.

That's November. At the end of December, one of Haig's assistants, who's a good friend of mine, visits me for Christmas in Havana. The Cubans know who he is, of course, and they suggest a lunch.

We get together for lunch. They say, "Look, we're talking about dialogue." This obviously is in response to Haig's suggestion that they want actions and not words. "We want you to know that we have suspended all arms shipments to Central America." That was one of our major complaints.

I laughed and said, “Well, you always say that, but as it turns out all you mean is that you have suspended arms shipments to El Salvador. And of course you have, because it doesn’t have a Caribbean coastline. But you are still sending arms to Nicaragua, and some of those arms are finding their way in.”

He replied, “No. I said we had suspended arms shipments to Central America. We are no longer sending arms to Nicaragua.”

I said, “Well, that’s the first I’ve heard of that. And they said, “Well, it may be, but it’s true, and you can check on it. And, given that, we hope that this can lead to negotiations, to a dialogue, between the United States and Cuba.”

So I send in a cable reporting this, and wait for my friend to report to Haig -- asking if we have any evidence to the contrary. Do we have evidence of a continuing flow of arms to Central America?

It takes me two months or so, and about a dozen cables, before I finally get an answer. And the answer is: “No, we don’t have any concrete evidence to the contrary. But it really doesn’t make any difference, in effect, because we’re not interested in a dialogue with the Cubans.”

So I went back and said, “Well, that’s unfortunate. But if that’s the decision, of course I must live with it.”

But then they get into taking new measures against Cuba, and the reasons given are because of “increasing Cuban arms shipments,” increasing Cuban trouble-making in Central America, and because the Cubans refuse to address our agenda of concerns. In other words, they won’t talk.

Both are an outright lie. It’s quite the other way around. It’s we who won’t talk. And they’ve said they don’t have evidence of continuing arms flow.

As we saw later -- remember that whole mess in Central America where there was lie after lie, Oliver North and Iran-Contra and all of that -- this was simply the early stages. It became clear that the U.S. government had not the slightest interest in negotiating this -- and anything else -- with the Cubans. What Haig wanted was to take it to the source. But that would have been very dangerous. And so rather than that, we sort of focused on Nicaragua.

But I then did leave the Foreign Service and turned to professoring and working in think tanks trying to bring about a more sensible relationship between the United States and Cuba. We have disagreements, we have conflicts of interest. We may not like their system. We’d like to see Cuba move toward a more open society.

This is not the way to do it. When you take this kind of

attitude and begin pressuring and threatening, you aren't going to bring the Cubans to the sort of position that we would like to see. But we're still at it.

This is the worst ever. This Administration has the worst policy toward Cuba of all. The worst policy, I would say, imaginable.

Thank you.

AMBASSADOR HUDDLESTON: Do you want to say just one word about whether you were involved in the negotiations on the Migration Accords in 1980?

In 1980, Mariel, over 130 Cubans came to Florida, as you're aware. And that was your period.

Did you help negotiate that?

MR. SMITH: Sure. Yes, the Migration Accords. Mariel happened because we wouldn't negotiate with the Cubans. Pressures were building, the Cubans were saying we needed to negotiate a process by which these people could leave through normal means.

We didn't negotiate. Mariel came upon us because some Cubans in a bus crashed through the gate of the Peruvian Embassy seeking asylum. And as they went through, the guards on each side opened fire, and one shot the other, and that caused the Cubans to say, "Enough of this. We're not going to risk the lives of our guards anymore

to keep people out of embassies. And we don't care if they go in. It's up to the embassies themselves to control these things."

So they removed the guards at the Peruvian embassy. I was at a cocktail party that night, and there were some guys from the Foreign Ministry there. They were telling me what they'd done. But, they said, a few dozen people may go in. "Well, too bad. The Peruvians have brought this on themselves, and they'll have to live with it."

I said, "A few dozen people? Listen, you guys may have opened Pandora's box."

"No, no. Don't worry."

Well, within four days there were 10,000 people in the Peruvian Embassy. Mariel is a port down here just to the west of the area in Havana where the Peruvian Embassy was, and so the Cubans came up with the idea of opening the port at Mariel, telling people in Miami if they wanted to come down and pick up relatives, "Come on down. They'll be there at Mariel, or they'll be along shortly." Get all the people out of the Peruvian Embassy and so forth.

And so suddenly Mariel was upon us -- and went through the summer, until September of that year.

AMBASSADOR HUDDLESTON: Well, I think I'd better end it there and turn it over to Ambassador John Ferch, who followed you.

John was in Cuba from 1982 to 1985 at the height of the Cold War, when I would say that Cuba was really a threat to the United States because of its Soviet sponsor.

John subsequently became Ambassador to Honduras and, before that, he was Deputy Chief of Mission in Mexico City.

John, I'm very interested about some of these themes already that Wayne has brought up. One might be: USINT Chiefs aren't always completely aware of what's going on in Washington. And Washington isn't always completely aware of what's going on in the political community which is Cuba.

As you find out more and more, Cuba becomes a domestic political issue.

John?

AMBASSADOR FERCH: I'm going to concentrate on the theme "managing a relationship." Now, to state the obvious, you manage any relationship in a context, what's going on.

I was in Cuba, as Vicki said, during the height of the Cold War. Well, maybe not the height, but it was very intense. That's '82 to

‘85. And what did we see as we looked out from Washington at the world in which Cuba was acting?

We saw the Cold War, obviously -- the Russians and their Cuban allies. The Sandinistas were in full control in Nicaragua. The Salvadorean civil war was active. And in Grenada, the new Jewel Movement seemed to be allied with Cuba, and it seemed to be leftist. The Russians had an embassy there, and Cubans were building an airstrip. It seems kind of strange.

The Cubans were in Angola. And the fact that they had gone into Angola was why the Interests Section was still an Interests Section and had not matured into an embassy.

Mariel was still on our minds. But not only Mariel, but all of the Marielitos which were in our prisons and mental health institutions.

There was also evidence of drug trafficking throughout Cuba.

This is how we saw the picture.

How did the Cubans see the world, looking north?

They saw a Reagan Administration whose rhetoric had escalated tremendously. You remember, the “Evil Empire" and all that stuff? They also saw the Reagan Administration, beyond rhetoric, was

re-arming tremendously, supporting the Salvadorean government and other things of that nature.

So what they saw was an America which was more unpredictable than before and thus, from their perspective, more threatening.

So, given those two perspectives, what were my instructions when I went down there?

Frankly, I'd gotten very few instructions. I was not briefed on many of the things Wayne said. But I was given one briefing, which was quite revealing.

Larry Eagleburger, who was then the Deputy Secretary of State, called me in just before going down and he said something to this effect: "I can't let you go down empty-handed." He said, "When you get down there, I want you to tell them that if they put MIGs -- " -- and this is a paraphrase -- if they put MIGs into Central America, into Sandinista, there will be bad consequences."

How, you might think, how does that equip Ferch with some useful information that's going to make his job easier?

But, anyway, that was how he was -- he filled my hand.

So I go down there, and within days, I got an appointment with Ricardo Alarcon, who was then Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs,

and I gave this message. He said, “Why don’t you talk to the Nicaraguans?” We went around on that.

I wondered what was this all about? In retrospect, I think that Eagleburger really did equip me. He was saying: we’re going to deal with you, but we’re going to deal with you through Ferch, not through the Cuba Interests Section here in Washington, but through Ferch.

And he was also saying -- and this wasn’t said, but it’s implicit in here: we’re going to negotiate, or at least we’re going to talk about your foreign policy. It may be negative, but we’re recognizing that you have an independent foreign policy, that this is not something that you’re simply doing because the Soviets said it. So we’re dealing with you directly.

Tthose are my interpretations, but I think they stand up.

What were the Cuban objectives? What did they think when I was coming down here?

Wayne and I had a meeting before I went down, and he mentioned who his principal contacts were. And all Foreign Service officers, when they go to a post, the first thing you do is you get out and you scurry around and you meet people, you make your contacts.

Wayne had told me that his principal contacts were Jose Luis Padron, who was a personal friend of Castro, Minister of Tourism, but also he was in the Secret Service. A very powerful man. And also Ricardo Alarcon, who I've already mentioned, the Vice Minister, Jose Antonio Arbisu in the Americas Department of the Party, and Sao Simende who was an aide to the Vice President.

I'd been in the Foreign Service for some time by that time.. I had served as economic counselor in several posts, and economics was my expertise.

I thought that, in addition to meeting these people, if I could meet some of the Cuban economic types, I might provide some insights to Washington, and it would also be an entree to my life with the Cubans.

So in that first period of time I asked for appointments -- you had to get your appointments through the Foreign Ministry. You couldn't just go directly. I asked for appointments with the various economic ministers.

I got appointments Padron, Alarcon, and Arbisu right away. I didn't get appointments with economic ministers for at least 18 months.

Thereafter, I met with these people at least monthly. We'd exchange luncheons, sometimes all together, usually not. I didn't see Saosamende that often. We didn't hit it off. I'm quite convinced that was personal. We didn't like each other. The others, we liked each other and we got along. And even if we had nothing to say, we'd keep up the contact. Frequently we did have things to say -- which I'll get to.

What conclusions do I draw from this?

I drew -- this was not an immediate conclusion; it took me time to come to this -- that the Cubans wanted effective communication with us. They made it possible for me to see the right people immediately, or frequently, whenever I wanted to see them. They wanted to have communication. That was what they wanted out of the relationship.

But just as we didn't want a positive image from dealing with Cuba here, they didn't want a positive image of me trotting around the country to economic types.

So now let me give you some examples of the interaction that went on during my time. This was just a little part of it.

We indicted some Cuban officials. I forget the details, for drug-running in Miami, or in Florida someplace. Fidel sent Padron over to see me. I say "he sent," because Padron said Fidel sent him -- to

have me tell Washington that we were barking up the wrong tree; that these people were not guilty of drug-running. I don't know if they were or not. The story goes on, it's rather funny, because I have some insights into it from my Mexican experience. But they were dealing with us, telling us that these indictments were wrong.

They called me in once to try to persuade me to be really forceful with Washington about the Pan-American Games. They wanted to host the Pan-American Games and they thought maybe that they could persuade us not to oppose them. I'm sure they knew we wouldn't support them for that.

And then, the most important of all, during the morning of our invasion of Grenada, our communications had been down. I was not told in advance about the invasion.

Our communications were down. I'm sure the Cubans had cut them down. Tony Motley, the Assistant Secretary for Latin America then, called me up that morning and dictated a note to be given to the Cubans. And that note -- I've never seen it, and maybe somebody's got it, but it would be interesting for somebody to get it through the Freedom of Information Act -- was right out of the 19th century.

"You're not the objective here. We're not fighting with you. We respect what you're doing down there. You can leave with honor."

And, if I remember right," -- with flags flying, and with your guns -- " -- and all the rest of it. And it was right out of the 19th century.

So I jotted this down, translated and gave it to Alarcon. He was pissed off. He was really mad. We didn't have a conversation.

But, coincidentally, I had previously scheduled a meeting with Padron at 10 o'clock that day. It was totally coincidental.

So I called Tony and asked if I should continue, and he said yes, repeat the message, which I did. And Padron immediately gets on the phone with Castro, relays the message again. And Castro said -- this is just an interesting aside, not part of my thing here. He said, "Tell Ferch that he's out of date. Our men fought to the last man. It's all over. There's nothing to lay down."

Of course they had not, but that's neither here nor there. And that's why he got so mad about it.

But, anyway, that was our communication. And then subsequently, throughout the week or weeks -- I forget how long it took before the Cubans came home -- almost daily I was in communication with them with, messages from Washington about how to handle this, and back and forth. And they would send messages back.

And then there was Angola. My involvement in Angola was different than Jay's going to talk about, because it started but didn't go anywhere.

One day I was reading *Granma,* the paper, and on the back page there was an article about Assistant Secretary Crocker, the African affairs assistant secretary, about negotiations on the Angolan issue. It was a very favorable article. I said to myself: they're telling us something here. They want to get involved in this or something. They wouldn't write something if it wasn't a message.

So I sent a cable up, and Washington thought about it and thought about it and thought about it. Then I think they sent me back instructions to begin talking about this -- which I did with Padron. Only once. This is in the spring before I left.

And nothing came of it. I don't know the end of it. Maybe Jay has insights into this, but nothing came of it. But that's how it started.

And, finally, the migration agreement, which was cember of 1984. I was negotiated very secretly. It was signed in Deaware of the negotiations but I wasn't involved in them, and they were done in Washington.

When they were signed, Fidel went on television to speak to the nation about what had been agreed to. Coincidentally, that night there was a diplomatic reception that I went to, and he called me into the inner sanctum. He wanted to talk to me about this.

He wanted me to convey a message to underscore, to the extent that I could, that he had made a moral commitment, that he was really very taken with the about-face -- as he saw it -- in his policy in dealing with us. And he wanted us to know that he felt this was a moral commitment.

But that was the type of thing that went back and forth.

So what conclusions do I draw from this experience?

I think during the time I was there, there was a great deal of reality displayed by both sides. Our objective was not regime change. I never heard that phrase. And certainly it wasn't normal relations.

I think it was -- and this is my wording, no one in Washington: "Cultivate your own garden." I say that because I gave a speech, the only public speech I gave when I was there. I was invited to address what I think was their foreign service academy. And I did, with Washington's approval. Washington wrote the speech. I said I wouldn't write that speech. I wasn't about to put my neck in that one.

I read this speech. Afterward, in the question and answers, one of the Cubans, probably a young Foreign Service officer, stood up and said, “Listen, you’re active in the world. Why can’t we be active in the world?” -- or words to that effect.

I responded, “Look. There’s a Cold War on. You’re associated with the Soviets. You’re allies.” And I implied that “You’re not their lackeys. You’re not just doing their bidding. But you’re out there playing in the field where they are, and this is dangerous. The Soviets and we have avoided a war for many, many years in a very dangerous situation. You are treading on ground where it doesn’t help either them or us to keep this situation (inaudible).”

“So what we want -- ” -- and these are my words now -- “What we want is for you to stay home and cultivate your own garden.” And I think that was our policy at the time. And no one disagreed with me.

What did Castro want? I think it was much simpler.

Castro still wanted to define himself as an international player. And he wanted to define himself as in opposition to us. And he was not about to give up his “internationalist duty,” that phrase that Cubans were always exhorted to.

But he did want to maintain good, effective contact with us. And I would call that contact an insurance policy. He knew that it was dangerous, and he didn't want something to go wrong because there was miscommunication.

Now, to the end -- and now for something totally different. After about 18 months I was allowed to see economic ministers. I did some good reporting about how Cuban industry was pretty bizarre. And I did some good reporting about Cuba's strange negotiations with the Paris Club. And I did some really good reporting about how the Soviets were down on the Cuban's back for economic reasons and wanted them to shape up.

To my knowledge, no one in Washington cared a bit about those economic reports. This was not the Washington focus at all. So that's where I stand.

AMBASSADOR HUDDLESTON: John, the lessons I get from you is that you went down at a dangerous time. You were made the point person to deal with the Cubans. And the Cubans gave you great access, which you had during a time of a number of crises.

AMBASSADOR FERCH: That's correct.

AMBASSADOR HUDDLESTON: And it's interesting to see that you were a liaison who could relay both what was going on in Cuba to our government, and the views of our government to Cuba.

Did you ever meet with Fidel Castro?

AMBASSADOR FERCH: Several times. I don't think as many times as Wayne did. But, as I said, that last time, he called me in to convey this message to the government about his moral commitment.

Actually, if you allow me, this ends on a funny note. Properly viewed, everything is funny, actually.

He kept saying, "This is a moral commitment. I want you to tell them. Convey this message."

But he also said, "I want you to tell the American people -- " -- in addition to telling, you know, just the regular channels to Washington. "Tell the American people."

And I kept thinking, "Fidel, my brother-in-law is a real example of the American people. Bright, etcetera. He doesn't think about you at all."

So I go home, I would go into the residence afterward. And, of course, all my colleagues, diplomatic colleagues, gather around me as I come out from dinner, and they want to write to finesse them. And I go home and I tell my wife that you get paranoid there. And so

when I got drinks, and went out to the pool, and we're sitting there with the water up to our heads, and I whispered to her what this conversation was.

And I said, "What do you make of it?" And she said she couldn't either.

So I go to bed. And, of course, it's racing around in my mind. And I get up at three o'clock. And I sent my reporting cables in. I looked up in the dictionary some psychological terms, one of which was "megalomania." I started the cable with that.

And my conclusion was: Fidel is an actor who strides the world stage, sees himself striding the world stage. And because he is an actor of world stature in his own mind, he assumes that the world's most important audience -- us -- is paying attention to him. And therefore he wanted us to know that this was a moral commitment. And that he was serious about this.

So I thought that was kind of a good definition of megalomania. Because we basically ignore him. After I retired, I was National Intelligence Officer for Economics in the CIA for awhile -- and when I was there, some of their psychiatrists told me that that was a good cable, that they were right on. This guy has a megalomania.

So there you have it. That has nothing to do with anything, by the way.

(Laughter)

AMBASSADOR HUDDLESTON: We would move to Ambassador Curt Kamman, who served from ‘85 to ‘87, but I couldn’t find him. So if I do find him, I will promise you a return engagement with all six of us.

The other Chiefs of USINT are still active-duty Foreign Service officers so, of course, they are not able to be with us today.

I now want to introduce Jay Taylor. Jay served in Cuba as USINT Chief from 1987 to 1990. He was also Deputy Assistant Secretary for Intelligence and Research. He is currently an Associate at the Fairbank Institute for East Asian Studies at Harvard University.

Jay was there for the Tripartite Accords, and the only time we have negotiated with Cuba and a group of other countries. Obviously we’ve negotiated migration agreements, but never with a group of other countries.

Jay, how did we do?

MR. TAYLOR: Well, it was a very interesting time to be there.

After John left, we had this interim period when Curt Kamman was there, but a lot had happened since then. And the world had changed significantly from the time when Wayne was there.

That is, the world had changed, world politics had changed. What was happening was primarily happening in the Soviet Union, and between U.S.-Soviet relations. It was no longer an "Evil Empire." Ronald Reagan had declared that. He said it was not an "Evil Empire" under Gorbachev.

This was a fundamental change. It's happening in the Soviet Union for the first time in 60 years or so. That is *Glasnost* and *Perestroika* were already at work in the Soviet Union. Gorbachev had been there for two years.

These suggested what was happening, the openness suddenly occurring. The readiness to accept more dissent, and even dissent within the Soviet bloc countries, suggested the world was changing fundamentally because the Soviet Union really was changing. Ronald Reagan had agreed with Margaret Thatcher that this was a new world, a new man. And so Soviet-U.S. relations were changing.

Castro and the Cuban hierarchy recognized that this was a totally new situation for them; that their dependence upon the Soviet Union, their economic dependence -- their primary international

position, their whole political position -- as the major ally and really the most important, independent ally of the Soviet Union during the Cold War -- all of this was going to change.

So I think that Castro, beginning in 1987, was the most anxious he'd ever been to have good relations with the Soviet Union. I think for the first time he was really prepared, in order to achieve this, to make really substantial changes, including changes primarily in his international posture, and the international role that he played.

The most important thing was going to be Angola. And, as John said, this had really prevented (their sending troops to Angola and Ethiopia) the U.S. moving, in the early days under Carter, to real formal, official, diplomatic relations.

So when I got there I spent the first six or eight weeks talking with 150 or 200 people, including diplomats and the usual interlocutors in the Cuban government. But also other Cubans that were students, intellectuals, professors, and the foreign diplomats that were serious Castro-watchers.

It was obvious to me that everybody was saying pretty much the same thing: that Castro did feel he had now to get out of Angola; that he wanted to take part in the talks that were going on that had been brokered by Assistant Secretary Crocker in Angola that

involved Angola, South Africa and the Soviet Union. The South Africans had some troops there. They were siding with Unita against the Angolan government. The Angolans and the Soviets said, “You should let Cuba take part.”

In the State Department, the ARA Bureau, the Latin American bureau, under Elliot Abrams, they strongly opposed this. They said that Castro would simply disrupt and destroy the negotiations on Angola.

So after six or eight weeks there, talking with everyone I could find, it seemed to me that Castro did need to get out, now that he had sort of had a change of heart. In my cable back to the Department I said this: that anyway, it appeared we probably won’t get an agreement in Angola -- the Angolans had these Cubans there -- unless the Cubans took part. And we could test and see whether or not they really were cooperative.

In the meantime, during those first couple of months, at a reception, Castro had called me into the inner sanctum that John mentioned, and he had said that Cuba would like to take part in the talks, and Cuba would be cooperative.

So this was the cable that I sent off. I said I think they probably will be cooperative, because they need to be. The Soviets

want to settle this problem, and they want to get the Cubans out of there. And the Cubans can't stay very long if the Soviets don't say okay.

I got a zinger back from ARA, the Latin American bureau, that said I didn't know what I was talking about, that I'd only been there two months, and that Castro would not get out of Angola until South Africa became communist.

Well, there was a battle going on at that time in the State Department between the African Bureau, under Chet Crocker, who very much wanted the Cubans to take part.

Anyway, my cable was very useful in that debate, I think. And during my exchanges -- further discussions before we really opened serious talks with the Cubans on this -- I said: it's evident from my talks that Castro wants to see what is the benefit for him of getting out of this. I think he badly needs to get out of Angola.

But if we want to then move on to other issues, we have to let him understand that there will be some payoff for him and that there will be an improvement in relations. So this became another issue about whether or not we actually ever wanted to say that to them, that if they were cooperative on this issue, there would be an improvement in relations.

Finally on Christmas Day in 1987, I received a cable from the State Department telling me to talk to the Cubans and say that this is an official approach to them on the Angolan issue -- our first official approach. Give him our position and tell him what we hope to achieve, and what the goals were, and that we wanted to know what the Cuban position was, and what they were willing to do in the negotiations.

So I saw Jorge Risquet, who was the Politburo man for Africa. He was very cooperative and very positive and said the Cubans did want to take part.

Shortly after that, the MPLA, the Angolan government, launched an offensive against Unita. South Africa sent in a division of troops and the Cubans then sent over a tight brigade and a squadron of MIGs. Everything seemed to be escalating. But what was really quite impressive to me was that in Washington it got very little attention in the press, because it wasn't played up by the State Department or the U.S. government that we realized that this thing would sort itself out and we'd let all the parties know that Cuba was now taking part, getting ready maybe, to enter the negotiations. And this warfare that had escalated, well, it would settle down.

And it did settle down. We didn't make a huge issue of the fact that that Cuba had sent these reinforcements to Angola, which was in response to the South African's sending in their forces.

So they did take part. We did have informal exchanges. They sent a delegation to take part in the talks in Rwanda. And shortly after that we had talks in Havana. The South African military was there, South African diplomats, some of whom I knew, having served in South Africa.

We had talks in which Castro took part, and then we had private meetings afterward. Castro was totally committed, totally enthusiastic about this possibility. He saw himself now having something he'd never achieved before, that he was actually involved in a diplomatic accord with the United States, an international accord, in which the United States recognized him as a legitimate, serious government in world affairs, and one where we could take their word that they were really going to live up to their commitments.

These talks went on for about a year. Finally the agreement was signed, I think in December of '88. Secretary Schultz, speaking to the Cuban delegation, said that he wanted to thank the Cubans for playing a very cooperative and supportive role.

The Angolan agreement resulted in the Cubans withdrawing ahead of schedule all of their forces, all of their tanks, all of their MIGs. This led to the South African withdrawal of their forces from Angola. It led to the U.N. monitored elections in Namibia, and the independence of Namibia.

All of the objectives of the United States, the State Department and the African Bureau were achieved because of this.

Now, also during our early talks with the Cubans I had been authorized, as I had requested, to tell the Cubans that if this happened, that if we actually achieved our objectives in Angola with the cooperation of the Cuban side, that this would result in an improvement of relations.

Sometime in early 1989 -- after the agreement had been signed, the Cubans were out of Angola. In the meantime, they would also withdraw from Ethiopia. I sent a cable to the State Department that said, “Well, now the thing’s over with. We can think about what are our options. How do we want to follow up with our commitment to the Cubans there would be an improvement.” We have several options. “One,” I said, “We could do nothing.” I mean, we might want to decide to do that. But there’s a couple of other options that we could do.

One would be to make some gesture and begin the process. Another one would be to make a few more gestures and begin a process, and see how they responded. Look how they respond on human rights and see what they do on that. But tell them that: "We're going to take a step in terms of relaxing the embargo, but then we're going to watch what you do on human rights."

Anyway, I got another zinger back from the State Department, from the ARA bureau, Latin American bureau, that said we had never made that commitment.

So I sent them back the numbers for the cable that had authorized me to say that. I never heard anymore about that issue.

In the meantime -- early on, of course, human rights was a very critical issue. I had made it clear to my Cuban contacts that next to Angola I thought this was really the most important issue. If they could make some real changes on human rights there could be some real positive consequences.

So the U.N. Committee on Human Rights was having its annual meeting in Geneva. I suggested that instead of pushing our usual resolution to condemn Cuba for its human rights abuses that we promote a resolution that would call for Cuba to accept an investigation

committee from the U.N. that would go to Cuba and investigate human rights there.

That was passed and Castro accepted it. They actually sent a delegation. They actually interviewed a hundred people or so and made a report saying there were essentially no civil rights in Cuba, and other aspects of human rights were violated. But Castro let them come and make that report.

And he did some things in response. One was he allowed the International Red Cross for the first time to send officers from the Red Cross to interview political prisoners in Cuba. He then facilitated more of our consular officers going out to interview political prisoners for possible status as political refugees.

And he was doing other things. Before, in Cuba, if you were a Cuban dissident, you were either in Miami or in jail. But by this time, Castro had begun to adopt sort of the Khrushchevian policy; that there could be dissidents who could criticize the government, and they could be living freely. The government would put them in prison occasionally and let them out. This was not a Stalinist way of dealing with dissidents.

So for the first time in 1987 we began seeing dissidents who were able to live at home. They could receive foreign press men,

and diplomats would come and talk to them about human rights. As I said, they would frequently end up back in prison for awhile -- or for a long while.

Anyway, this was happening. Changes were taking place.

Central America was also still a major issue because of what was happening in El Salvador and Nicaragua, and Escapula's peace process. We were pressing for free and monitored elections in Nicaragua.

In my talk with Carlos Aldana, who had been assigned by Castro in early '88 to deal with me in sort of escalating the contact to the Politburo on any issues involving the United States, Aldana was quite clear, in my contact with him over that next year or so that he was among those in the Politburo who had argued that with the changes going on in the Soviet Union, Soviet policy and U.S.-Soviet relations, that Cuba really had to make adjustments. In my talks with him I think it came out that he had a positive attitude toward the changes that Gorbachev was making; that he felt communism really needed to reform very badly. It needed to become economically efficient by introducing some free-market systems and reforms. It also needed to have more of a human face to be democratized.

He was the man I dealt with on most all of the issues. I also dealt with Arbisu and all the others.

In talking with him about Central America as still a basic fundamental issue between us, he repeated the fact that they were not any longer providing arms. I said, but still, it's the whole position, the whole expectation that the Nicaraguans and the Sandinistas have that you are behind them and whatever policies they take, you will support them.

He replied, "No, we don't -- we look forward to an election there. If it wasn't a communist-socialist government,that would be fine with us."

I said, "Well, people find that very hard to believe."

We talked about that during most of 1989. We had a new Assistant Secretary in the American Republic affairs, Latin American Affairs. Bernie Aronson had replaced Elliot Abrams. And he was much more open.

But, Cuba was pretty far down in terms of priorities. Nevertheless, he authorized me to continue the talks with Aldana on Central America.

Aldana said they were prepared to do something. At the same time, the Soviet ambassador took a positive public position on

Escapulas and monitored elections in Nicaragua. The Soviet ambassador, a new one had come in, a Yeltsin protégé. He was an extremely liberal guy, showing that there were fundamental changes that had happened, compared to the old Soviet apparatchik-type guy that had been the ambassador.

He also said they want to play a part in Escapulas. They wanted to be a part of it and show, just like in Angola, that they could play a positive part and help you achieve your objectives there.

I said, well our real objective would be a free election, which we thought probably means not a Sandinista government. Well, that's what they want.

I was going back to Washington in early December of '89, and he said, "Well, you'll have -- Aldana will have something for you when you get back. A proposal -- a concrete proposal on this."

But when I was back in Washington —a lot of things happened.

We had the fall of the Berlin Wall in December. The decision was made in Washington to move ahead with TV Marti. And then we had the American invasion of Panama when I got back. All of that sort of queered our talks.

And I think that TV Marti, which came in March of 1990, sort of ended. Aldana sent his aide to see me, who said we're just going to put this aside for the moment.

By that time Castro had realized what was happening with *Glasnost* and *Perestroika*, and that instead of putting a human face on communism, this was a death mask being put on communism, trying to democratize. So Castro really wanted to pull back.

Aldana was purged, went out to manage a factory or something.

AMBASSADOR HUDDLESTON: Another opportunity lost, perhaps.

MR. TAYLOR: Perhaps.

AMBASSADOR HUDDLESTON: But a fascinating history during that time. And Jay was very kind. Because I was the Deputy Director of Cuban Affairs at that time, and I was the one who put TV Marti on the air. Of course it wasn't seen, but I did not contribute very predictably to the relationship, as Alan was often telling me.

I would now like to introduce Ambassador Alan Flanigan.

Alan was the negotiator for U.S.-Greek Defense Cooperation, and came to the section as Head of Section from 1990 – 1993, and then went on to be our ambassador in El Salvador.

And so you're going to tell us about what happened then.

AMBASSADOR FLANIGAN: I'll try. And I'll do it very quickly.

First of all, going back to what Jay said, Carlos Aldana was considered, when I arrived there, to be sort of the prime minister. But, as he also said, he very quickly disappeared from the scene. A few months later he was gone. I never talked to him.

My contacts with the Cuban government were steady, regular, professional, correct most of the time -- but also testy and at a relatively low level. I met with Ramon Sanchez Parodi, who was the Vice Foreign Minister, who would come from being Cuban chief here, and go back there to do that.

Arbisu went from his roles in the Communist Party in Havana to come up here, and I met with him when he came back.

It was a time of transition for both sides.

First of all, Castro recognized, as Jay said, that the end had come of economic support from the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union had cut off all of the subsidies. Cuba was in a tailspin. Economically it was imploding, to use the trite phrase. . Within a couple of years its economy shrank by 40 percent. I don't know that that's

happened in any other economy around the world in this century, or at least in the last half of the 20th.

They weren't sure they could survive. They wanted to make sure, to the extent that they could, that we weren't a problem. They tried to maintain a decent relationship, but weren't interested in doing anything, as far as I could tell, to make it a more productive relationship.

Survival was what they were interested in.

The United States at that time was beginning to do other things as well.

I arrived in September of 1993. It wasn't long after that that Iraq invaded Kuwait. And the United States was not at all concerned about what was going on in Havana. They were concerned about what was going on in the Middle East.

And, you know, making a change in policy in Cuba, or toward Cuba, just falls into the politically too-hard category most of the time. There are very few opportunities that we have had over the years to make real progress in that area.

One of them might have occurred while I was there, but it didn't. After all, we had an election here in the United States. We had

a new administration come in which at least had some people in it that were sympathetic to the idea of opening the relationship up a little bit.

But in the end -- or not in the end but even in the beginning, during the campaign, I think the people who wanted the president elected made the choice that they would make the statements, do the necessary things to commit themselves to a continuation of the old policy. And that's what happened.

Inertia is an important thing in foreign policy and in diplomacy. And inertia took hold. For the three years I was there, not much happened.

Cuba itself struggled and did survive. By the time I left, it was beginning -- just beginning -- to pull out of the tailspin. But it was a different country.

When I arrived, I remember distinctly, it looked very poor. It looked shabby. And it was.

But three years later it was much worse. Statistics are always difficult, but there were perhaps 50,000 bicycles in Cuba when I arrived. By the time I left, there were somewhere in the range of 800,000 bicycles -- these heavy iron flying pigeons made in China. And there were no fat people left in Cuba.

Literally. Or animals, as Vicki said. It was a very difficult time for the Cuban people.

And we, of course, sat and watched. There were people who thought that the end was near. When I stopped in Miami on my way to Havana in 1990 there were bumper stickers on the cars that said, “Christmas in Havana.” And there were actually people that believed it. And most of it was wishful thinking, but certainly the country was in crisis.

But what most people seem to forget was that this was a country that was under the control of a very rigid bureaucratic Ministry of the Interior and Army. They controlled all of the communications, they controlled all of the weapons. And there was no desire on the part of Fidel Castro to commit anything to open up that might allow the people to begin to rise up and challenge his leadership.

There were dissidents -- a handful of dissidents. But, as Jay said, they were allowed to live, they were allowed to meet with us -- and we met with them regularly. But they were also, from time to time, arrested and put in prison, sometimes for short sentences, sometimes for long sentences. But they were certainly under control.

I’d like to leave some time for questions, because I know there are some questions. And so I’ll just turn this over to Vicki now.

It was a sad time to be there. We missed some opportunities. But I'm not sure they were real.

By that time, Fidel Castro needed us more as the enemy than he needed us as a friend. And I don't think that he would have been prepared to reciprocate in any solid way to anything that we did.

We could have -- one thing we could have done then, and we can do now, is take steps that are in our interest alone and begin to open up. But they have to be in our interest, and they have to be justified purely on U.S. national interest. Because I don't think we can expect reciprocity, especially in the current situation in Havana.

After Fidel goes, we'll have a different situation, and we'll see if we can make some advances then.

Vicki?

AMBASSADOR HUDDLESTON: Thank you, Alan. I want to fast-forward you right now to 1999, when I walked through the gates as the Chief of USINT -- the first woman to go down as Chief of USINT.

It was a different place then. They had survived the special period in the time of peace. A lot of those bicycles were gone, sort of replaced by the Ladas, and Lada-engines in the old clunker cars.

And President Clinton had decided that he would change the policy -- although when he first was elected he had made a promise

to the Cuban American National Foundation to bring the hammer down on Fidel, which actually led to the passage of the Cuban Democracy Act and its signing into law by President Bush.

Clinton authorized new measures which allowed people-to-people travel. And I suspect a number of you in this room went down under that. Exchanges with churches, sports groups, artistic groups, lots of museums. I bet every museum of modern art in the United States had gotten down to Cuba by then. I see George here. He brought a group of choir boys down to Cuba.

There was this huge interaction that was beginning between the Cuban people and the American people.

Cuban Americans were allowed to travel at least once a year. And many people believed that the Clinton program would be to eventually lift the travel ban. I very much believed that that's where Clinton was headed. And I very much believed that many Cuban Americans thought that was where Clinton was headed, too.

I was only there a couple of months before Fidel Castro gave a speech in Cardenas, and said, "If the United States doesn't send that boy back --"-- little Elian Gonzalez, the child who was picked up in an inner tube, taken to a hospital in Miami and ended up with his

relatives. I'm sure everybody here knows that story from beginning to end.

I believe 100 percent that Fidel used that in order to stop the Clinton Administration from moving any further toward lifting the travel ban.

Brian Latell pointed out the other day that there's a similar case right now in Miami and nobody's talking about it. Different style, overall, with Fidel. Cuban Americans know they lost big on that. It stopped the new Clinton measures. And even more, it reinvigorated a very tired revolution. From what Alan said, you could almost hear and see that.

Signboards were all over and huge marches started. In December I looked out the window and there were a thousand people in front of USINT, 2,000 the next day. A week later, 10,000. For the next three months there were at least 10,000 people in front of USINT every day.

And then Castro decided to build the Tribuna Abierta, the Open Court, in front of the Section -- which used to be the old Fourth of July Park. Fortunately one of our Cuban employees -- we have 200 Cuban employees, but we don't call them direct employees because we hire them through the state agency. We got them pensions. They built

the Tribuna and began doing these huge marches, 100,000, 200,000, 300,000, going by the Interests Section.

You're right. They were all organized. Everybody had to come from the state enterprises. They were bussed in from around the country. But every Cuban I knew, from dissidents to civil society, agreed that Elian had to come back. This was a perfidy of the northern neighbor, and it gave Fidel the greatest cause he could ever have had.

U.S. relations are not number one for Cuba; number one for Cuba is staying in power of the hierarchy. And number two for Cuba is to project its image on the world stage and survive.

When the George Bush Administration came in, the new measures were continued: the travel, the exchanges, the people-to-people contact. Our Interests Section began distributing books all over Cuba to the independent librarians and to the journalists.

It was a hugely vibrant time. More people came down. And Fidel loved to have Rockefeller, Senator Specter, Barbara Boxer, Carol King, and Kevin Costner come and talk to him.

And because he loved that, and because the regime was getting quite a bit of money, he was not willing to come down hard on the human rights activists, or even the Interests Section. He held a

huge rally against the Interests Section because of my radio, which Wayne always hated a lot.

And I went. When I got back one of the dissidents, who's always been my favorite, Felix Bonne, came to me and he said, "You know, that was great you went to that mass rally. But remember, this relationship between the Interests Section and our government is important for us, the human rights activists. Because you are protecting us, you're representing us, and you give us more space -- especially if you keep the threat level down."

Finally, because I believe the situation was so much more open, Oswaldo Paya was able to gain 10,000 signatures, in accordance with the Cuban constitution, and ask for a vote, a referendum up or down, on the Cuban constitution. And the proudest moment I ever had in Cuba was when former President Carter went with Fidel to the Aula Magna of the University of Havana, no further than you, sitting, looking at him, and called for the Cuban government to allow an up or down vote on the Cuban constitution.

Sure, he also called for the end of the embargo, but that was an amazing moment. And it showed just how much might be achieved in Cuba.

But, alas, another opportunity lost.

Many in Miami supported -- and I would say the majority -- what we were doing at that time. But the more conservative Cuban Americans did not. The Florida delegation in Congress did not either. The Administration decided to change the policy. And so it turns out that President Bush was both the man, the President, who brought about the most engagement, or liberal, if you will, policy with Cuba. And now, by far, the harshest policy with Cuba.

We're open for your questions.

Yes, sir.

MR. McAULIFF: John McAuliff from the Fund for Reconciliation and Development.

Two questions -- one, back history.

Nelson Mandela credits the Cubans, consistently, with having contributed to the defeat, the collapse, of the Apartheid regime. And I'm wondering in retrospect what our view is of the Cuban role in Angola and its contribution.

The second thing is more recent history. Your successor, Vicki, the change in the policy -- Jim Cason did what, from my experience in Vietnam and other places, was totally provocative, deliberately incendiary, in terms of his relationship with dissidents. And it either meant that he was naive about how the Cubans would react in

terms of the arrests and the show trials for the 75 and imprisonment of them, or that he was deliberately doing it to create -- I don't know whether it was Otto Reich or Noriega -- create an incident that would undermine the movement in Congress to reduce travel restrictions and the embargo.

What is your view of the kind of role he played, and how much was it an intentional provocation that led to the real diminution of interest in Congress?

Both history questions.

AMBASSADOR HUDDLESTON: Who wants the South Africa question?

MR. SMITH: I think that we didn't like South Africa and Africa in general. But looked at from the standpoint of history, on balance Cuba played a very positive and constructive role in Africa.

They did help the National Liberation forces. We saw it, as a matter of spreading communism. It really wasn't that at all.

So I think Nelson Mandela is right.

MR. TAYLOR: Having served in South Africa for three years, I think Wayne is right in terms of how the African National Congress looked upon it. It certainly was an important role.

But it didn't play a critical role in the decision of the South African government to free Mandela and negotiate an end to Apartheid and essentially the White control of South Africa.

It wasn't really a military issue. It was events happening in Africa, events happening in the world, and the total isolation of South Africa and the realization of the White leaders, including in the military, that in the long term it was going to be a disaster.

So I think without Cuba it would have happened at the same time.

AMBASSADOR HUDDLESTON: And the other part of your question -- I actually think the Administration would like to have a better relationship now between the current U.S. USINT Chief, Mike Parmly, with the Cuban government because it provides insight and your line into telling the Cubans "don't do this," or "do this," or having the feel for what's going to happen in Cuba.

Unfortunately, the relationship did break down at that time, and at least Ambassador Dagoberto at the Cuban Interests Section here told me that they haven't spoken with the Principal Officer since I left five years ago.

I wish the Cubans would. I think they need to. And I think that our USINT Chief would be willing to talk to the Cubans at this point.

MR. SMITH: Michael Parmly, now the Chief of our Interests Section, is a fine guy, and he would be the perfect Chief of the Interests Section to carry on a dialogue. His family is from -- not his immediate family -- Cuba.

But, given the policy, and that bloody sign around, on the front, it's like Times Square. They run it around the Interests Section, all sorts of propaganda messages and so forth. And you now have all these flags so that no one can see the sign. The Cubans have put up all these flagpoles, and they have the huge black flags flying all the time.

There's no chance at all, with that kind of relationship, of any meaningful dialogue. I wish they would talk to Parmly. I wish at least we had that contact.

But this Administration is not interested in any kind of constructive dialogue with the Cubans. I think the Cubans have simply responded: okay, that's the way you want it? That's fine.

AMBASSADOR HUDDLESTON: Thank you. Thank you, Wayne.

Mark, did I see —

MR. FALCO: Marc Falco of the American Enterprise Institute.

Over the years I've had the opportunity to talk to a couple of fairly senior Cuban diplomats who have defected, and I'm sure everyone on this panel knows who I'm talking about.

And from these conversations -- one in particular, with Jose Antonio Blanco who lives in Canada -- I was struck with the notion, and I've come to believe it, and I'd be interested in the response of the panel, that everybody in Cuba wants normal relations with the U.S., including, and maybe even especially, General Raúl Castro.

But there is one person in Cuba who doesn't. And that is Fidel.

In fact, that there have been episodes in the bilateral relationship, as related to me, where it looked like some progress was being made, and it was truncated at the top.

I wonder if the members of the panel would comment on that?

AMBASSADOR HUDDLESTON: Well, let me start with Alan, and I think that's evident, because of what happened with Elian.

Alan?

AMBASSADOR FLANIGAN: No, I agree. I think that's quite likely. Of course, we simply don't know and won't know until Fidel is gone.

But I think it's quite possible.

My feeling about transition after Fidel was that it wouldn't occur until he died, and that it would be -- it could be, if we were careful, an orderly transition. And it might take a few years. If we were patient and played it right, we would have an open society within a few years which would reenter the brotherhood of nations, and have a normal relationship with the United States and all of the other nations surrounding it.

So -- Fidel didn't want that. He had come to the point, I think somewhere probably in the late '70s and early '80s when he was so full of himself, so happy with the way things were going, that he didn't feel he needed anything. Later, things began to deteriorate and he found out that it was too late to do anything productive. He felt it was necessary to have us as an enemy, something that he could use to rally the nationalistic forces in Cuba.

And so we're playing a waiting game. Once he goes maybe we can do something more productive.

AMBASSADOR HUDDLESTON: Okay.

MR. TAYLOR: Could I -- very briefly -- I think that's probably right. Castro, I have always thought, mostly from the very

beginning and then at the end, even today, sees the U.S. as more useful as an enemy than as a normal partner in something.

But I think there was this period in ‘87, ‘88, when things were changing so dramatically in the Soviet Union and the Soviet bloc that he had been persuaded by people like Aldana that, well, maybe we have to go along with this, and maybe that will be the way we have to go.

Real detente between the United States and the Soviet Union -- real detente -- changes, we have to change.

But I would say —

AMBASSADOR HUDDLESTON: And that’s -- Aldana went down.

MR. TAYLOR: That policy didn’t work out, so Aldana eventually went down.

But also we have to say the Cuban hierarchy, as Vicki said, is committed overall to staying in power. And what price would they pay for normalization? I think if we simply wanted to have trade, an embargo, they would agree to that.

But, like Castro, their primary objective is staying in power. And whether it’s a change in human rights or whatever, they’re doing it on a pragmatic basis: what is the absolute thing they have to do?

AMBASSADOR HUDDLESTON: Absolutely, yes.

John, do you want to add to that?

AMBASSADOR FERCH: Yes.

Let me suggest something that I haven't heard anyone say or read in the press.

Castro is already gone. And if you had had a panel of physicians up here, not ex-foreign service officers, you might be hearing that a man in his condition cannot be making decisions, cannot be imposing his will.

This is a very sick man and has been for a long time.

Now, if I'm correct in this -- I'm not a physician -- if, in fact, Castro is effectively gone, the regime is continuing on.

So the question has to be rephrased: not "after Castro," but "after what?" I mean, there is a -- it's going on.

And if he's not making the decisions, and I suspect, for medical reasons, he really isn't, we ought to re-think this, look at it a different way.

AMBASSADOR HUDDLESTON: Well, you wanted to hit that real fast, but could you say something about Raúl?

MR. SMITH: Yes.

Look, I think you're absolutely right that Raúl Castro does want to change.

I had a conversation with Raúl Castro in 1982, not too long before I left Havana, and he said, "Why is it so difficult for us to get some dialogue started?" I replied, "Well, you know, Cuba's a very emotional issue in the United States." And he said, "Well, yeah, but, you know, you have your system, we have ours. And we aren't going to change ours, and you aren't going to change yours. But there are conflicts of interest which it would be to the benefit of both sides to address and begin to resolve. Why can't we do that?"

He then took over a year-and-a-half ago, and shortly thereafter he issued a statement which was almost word for word that same thing: why can't we talk?

He's open to that and I think that the armed forces have been deeply involved in the economy, and in a very constructive way -- in tourism and so forth. They have the idea of making profit. They've shown themselves to be good businessmen.

I think they would change the economy. They would like to. But there is Fidel, still in the background.

Now this was very useful for a time. You had Castro still there as the reassuring figure in the background as they move toward

transition. But Raúl's sense, I'm sure, is that Fidel wouldn't approve of many of the changes he would wish to make. Fidel's not making the decisions anymore, but Raúl, I'm sure, does not want to move too far too fast. Fidel has now become not a figure who's helpful to them, but one who holds them back.

The question is: how much longer can this go on? They need to move ahead.

AMBASSADOR HUDDLESTON: And someone said: "There Raúl is. He's in the motorboat. The motorboat's going 40 miles an hour, but it's tied to the dock."

And we know who the dock is.

Next question?

Dan?

MR. ERIKSON: Thank you. Dan Erikson of Inter-American Dialogue. I enjoyed the panel.

My question is kind of provoked by Mr. Flanigan's remarks: has the U.S. to some degree missed its moment to have a maximum impact on Cuba?

If you look at Cuba today it has this great relationship going with Chavez. Its number two trading partner is China. You

obviously have the Canadians and Europeans who are still investing there big time, despite Helms-Burton.

I don't know if you'd say U.S. influence in the hemisphere has collapsed, but it has certainly shrunk by a considerable margin over the last several years.

Going forward, is the U.S. going to play as big a role in Cuba's future as many people thought several years ago?

Thank you.

AMBASSADOR HUDDLESTON: Alan?

AMBASSADOR FLANIGAN: Well, I think it's quite possible that we have missed some opportunities along the way.

But there is a risk-reward ratio that, in dealing with Cuba, every political operative has to keep in mind. And each administration has to worry about this emotional relationship, the votes involved. It's not just a bilateral relationship in the traditional sense.

And so, yes, I think we've missed chances. But I don't think it's the end of our chance to have a normal relationship with Cuba again.

Our role in the hemisphere has changed. Has it diminished? Yes, somewhat. Some of this has to do with the way the

world has developed over the last few years, the importance of petroleum, our lack of it.

But, you know, we shouldn't despair. We should look forward and see if we can find an opportunity in the next couple of years to make this work. And I think there are ways.

AMBASSADOR HUDDLESTON: Ambassador -- I —

MR. SMITH: No, I have to answer that.

AMBASSADOR HUDDLESTON: Oh, you have to.

MR. SMITH: Yes -- no, I'm sorry.

AMBASSADOR HUDDLESTON: But briefly, Wayne.

MR. SMITH: I would almost totally disagree with that.

I had dinner with Alarcon six months or so ago, and the conversation went something like this: "You know, we'd really like to open up. We'd really like to buy more U.S. agricultural products. We'd like to open up to trade. We'd like to have close academic exchanges with you -- " -- and a whole series of things. "But your government obviously has no interest in any of that. Fine. We have a new economic relationship with Venezuela, with China. We're continuing to trade with Canada and Spain. We're doing fine."

"And maybe we should appreciate your government's position, because increasingly the United States has become irrelevant.

We'd like to deal with you, but we don't have to. We can do fine without you."

I think that's a growing sense in Cuba that they can get along fine without us.

SPEAKER: (Inaudible.) -- ignore the elephant.

MR. SMITH: They've been 90 miles away and have survived just fine.

AMBASSADOR HUDDLESTON: And Cuba has always looked to the United States -- always, since independence, looked to the United States, Ambassador -- right?

MR. SMITH: Nonsense.

MR. REY: I'm Nick Rey. I was Ambassador to Poland in the 1990s and lived through their transition.

I'm wondering, in addition to the tether of Fidel Castro holding back potential change right now, whether there isn't the stark, raving fear on the part of all levels of the current Administration in Cuba that change means they're going to lose their livelihood, their lives, in terms of what they do.

And I wonder whether in our thinking about the future transition of Cuba if we shouldn't have a significant piece in there of

"keeping these people happy." That was very, very important in Poland. And it's what made for a reasonably smooth transition.

I guess that's a statement, but it's also a question. Does anybody feel very strongly against that point of view?

AMBASSADOR HUDDLESTON: Thank you very much. And I'm glad that you got onto the transition question, because I think there's a real debate going on right now -- not within the Administration, because this Administration has made its position fairly clear that there isn't going to be real help for a transition. The transition has to happen, and then there is real help.

The debate that's going on outside the Administration is clear: shouldn't we be helping in the transformation?

MR. TAYLOR:I think the better parallel is with Vietnam and China, where you had a communist government that had come to power independently, and had charismatic leaders whose authority still sort of carries on.

Whereas as soon as Soviet support ended for Poland, the communist regime was doomed. It was important that the apparatchiks understood that they weren't all going to be hung up, and went along with the transition.

In Cuba, I think, as Alan was saying, the control they have is very strong. And that's only going to loosen, if at all, very, very gradually as is happening in Vietnam and China.

AMBASSADOR HUDDLESTON: John?

AMBASSADOR FERCH: Yes, I'd like to put some flesh on what Ambassador Rey said. Ambassador Rey and I had contact when I was in Poland.

The Polish Ambassador in Havana when I was there was an associate -- it became a friendship. We had luncheons and what have you, yell at each other publicly.

In another incarnation when I was in Poland with the Department of Labor, I looked him up and we had lunch several times. And he had some wonderful, wonderful sayings: "We had a revolution and my side lost." And he was selling Mercedes.

So I just wanted to give you some flesh on that.

AMBASSADOR HUDDLESTON: Next question? Yes.

SPEAKER: (Inaudible.) -- and I also lived in Havana during the Elian crisis. I was doing archival research. It caused great resentment, those demonstrations. I'm not sure whether the Lucha de la (inaudible) won or lost adherents.

But my question had to do with the military. We've mentioned Raúl. We know that the military has wide economic interests, of course. But this could make them eager for change or reluctant to change. It could work either way. They want to make money, but they don't want to lose what they own.

I'm wondering how much, if anything, do we know about the military? We don't have any contacts, but maybe other embassies do?

Do we know anything about the mood within the military? What the military desires? Is it all speculation?

Could any of you speak about your contacts with military officers?

AMBASSADOR FLANIGAN: Yes. I could speak to this.

When I was there between 1990 and 1993 we had no contact, and we had very little information because the military stayed very carefully away from all diplomats of all stripes -- except, perhaps, the Chinese and the Soviets.

The Soviets and the Russians dealt with us regularly. I met with the Soviet Ambassador and the Russian Ambassador, and we talked about all sorts of things. I would get anecdotes about the military, but I wouldn't get information of real substance.

So we didn't know directly.

AMBASSADOR HUDDLESTON: It's ironic. At one point there was pretty much agreement across the board to send a military attaché to Havana so that we'd have some sense of what was going on.

In the end, that military attaché became a Coast Guard attaché, which is still military, and was involved in counter-narcotics. And that person is still there, and that person still does have contact with the Border Guard and the Ministry of Interior.

When I was there the Coast Guard Officer actually attended one of the dinners with Fidel Castro, because by the time Alan and I got to Cuba we weren't meeting with that high level. I met with Lage once, and all the time with Alarcon. But very seldom with Lage.

AMBASSADOR FLANIGAN: Yes, my last meeting at the Foreign Ministry -- they brought in Robaina for a five-minute goodbye.

MR. SMITH: At the Center for International Policy, we have a member of our Board who fought with Raúl Castro in the mountains, and has maintained his contacts. And when he goes to Cuba he sees all the Raúlista commandantes.

So we have a fairly good idea about the attitudes in the army.

And, by and large, the feeling we get is that they do want to move ahead, and they feel that they will lose less from that than hanging back.

AMBASSADOR HUDDLESTON: I think we can take one more question.

Yes?

MR. LOYOLA: Mario Loyola, Senate Republican Policy Committee.

One of the things that the Cuban government has been complaining very loudly about in the past year strikes some people as very strange. They're complaining that the United States is being very slow in the processing of the visa applications -- the 20,000 visas that were granted to Cubans every year.

That strikes me as very strange. In the history of communism, normally the regimes are desperate to stop large-scale population transfers out of the country, whereas for the Cuban regime facilitating a large-scale population transfer seems to be almost an element of survival.

That's so strange, like everything else about that regime. What does that tell you, in terms of a change in posture over the last 10 years?

SPEAKER: I think unemployment is very high in Cuba today. The sugar mills, some 40, 45 percent of the sugar mills have closed down. But I understand that the workers are still receiving some of their pay.

So I think Castro feels he has a surplus, so he's happy -- he wants as many as possible to leave. It is kind of strange. As they go to Florida, they usually become part of the anti-Castro group and they're not very pro-Castro.

So it's kind of strange.

AMBASSADOR HUDDLESTON: It's -- in many ways what keeps the Castro regime going is the threat of the United States, and the unknown change. The fact that there is an emergency release-valve in mass migration and, even now, migration is over 15,000 annually, so that's a pretty good valve. And that's illegal migration. That doesn't include the 20,000 that we're supposed to be allowing to go to the United States.

I'd much rather see us issuing tourist visas so that the grandparents could go up and see their kids, and you could have the academics and the artists, and that kind of a thing.

But it's isolation, migration, and the threat that, in many ways, keeps the regime going. And that's why I think, if you go back to

that earlier question, U.S. policy is hugely important. Because it can prop up the continuation of the Cuban regime.

I'll ask Alan to give two words, and we'll just go down this way and see if there's any last thoughts.

AMBASSADOR FLANIGAN: Well, no, I don't have any last thoughts, except migration has always been an important topic that we've dealt with. We had migration talks -- nearly each one of us experienced some kind of migration talks, and negotiated migration agreements.

And, in the end, they were successful briefly, and led to recriminations when one side or the other, for one reason or another, decided that the other side wasn't adhering to the terms of the agreement. And that seems to be the case now.

But I'm sure we're doing the best we can. We don't have any interest in not providing those visas.

MR. TAYLOR: I would say that my experience there convinced me that certainly within the Cuban government, but also within even the hierarchy, there are people we worked with who are very pragmatic, relative moderates about human rights, or ideology, or relations with the United States.

Which makes me think that for the future there's very good hope that we can see a transition to a regime that is a more open society. It's still going to be a very controlled, communist-controlled regime. But eventually -- like China or Vietnam -- it will be a system where you have no political rights, essentially, and no civil rights, essentially. But, like China, the Chinese people are more free today than they've ever been in the history of China. Politically they have essentially no rights. And I think eventually, you know, we hope that they will make a further transition in China.

The first thing is to get this step toward a more free and open society, where you have a civil society. And this means there will also be change for the long term.

So the thing is the first step. And I'm optimistic that it will happen.

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