

"Gripping. . . . Supersedes all previous accounts of the most terrible moment of the Cold War. Drawing on hitherto unrevealed Soviet documents, it gives the Cuban missile crisis new dimensions of drama and danger." —Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

"ONE HELL OF A GAMBLE"

Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy 1958–1964



THE SECRET HISTORY OF THE
CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS



Aleksandr Fursenko
Timothy Naftali

“One Hell of a Gamble”

**KHRUSHCHEV,
CASTRO,
AND
KENNEDY,
1958–1964**

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Timothy Naftali*



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Responsibility for any mistakes in our re-creation of the international politics of the early 1960s belongs to us alone. But, to the extent that we offer a new and persuasive understanding for this critical period, our work reflects the excellence of the scholarship we were exposed to as students.

Introduction

For a generation of Americans and Russians, there was only one moment in the last half century when a third world war seemed possible. Americans of a certain age recall the flickering and foreshortened image of a handsome John F. Kennedy announcing that Soviet nuclear missiles were in Cuba, the reports of American jets and marines moving toward Florida, and the days of panic buying and uncertainty that ensued. Russians recall harrowing reports from Radio Moscow and the mobilization of the Soviet armed forces. For thirty-five years neither side has known how very close we actually came to a nuclear war in 1962.

On the night of October 22, hours before John Kennedy spoke to the world, the Kremlin indeed seriously considered using nuclear weapons on Americans. The appropriate orders were discussed, and the Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, stayed the night in his office so that he would be able to cancel these orders if they were necessary. At the same time 7,000 miles away the young American president John Kennedy, was being lectured by senior members of the U.S. Congress who wanted him to invade the island of Cuba despite the presence of Soviet troops and nuclear weapons there. "If we go into Cuba," Kennedy cautioned the congressional leadership, "we have to all realize that we have taken the chance that these missiles, which are ready to fire, won't be fired." We "are prepared to take it"; but the president noted, it would be "one hell of a gamble."

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 has opened a period of reexamination of the recent past not experienced since the intense debates of the 1920s over the causes of the First World War. It was only fifteen years ago that Ronald Reagan found the Cold War so threatening that he launched a crusade against the Soviet Union, and the world seemed to have entered another dangerous phase of a drama that had begun in 1946. Yet a decade later the Soviet Union was no more, communism was in retreat everywhere save China, and many people began to ask, What was the Cold War all about?

Based on unprecedented research across two continents, this is the inside story of the climactic years of the struggle between East and West, when nuclear war became more than a theoretical possibility for reasons that defied prediction. In the early 1960s a most unlikely country, Cuba, was the location and rationale for this challenge to international peace. An object of the American political imagination since the American Revolution, Cuba was described by Thomas Jefferson and John Quincy Adams as inevitably an extension of the United States. Less than a century later, when Spain lost control of its sugar colony, the United States assumed political, military, and economic dominance of the island. By the end of World War II, though Washington had delegated political authority to local Cuban elites, America remained the most powerful foreign presence in the lives of Cubans. These facts are well known. But in the late 1950s the Soviet Union began to take an interest in developments on this island off the coast of Florida, and by 1960 the Cuban issue had come to define the superpower conflict as forcefully as the future of West Berlin or nuclear testing. The reasons why this occurred, so important to the international political landscape of the 1960s and later, need to be told.

This is an international history. No one person or government created the mix of interest, power and fear that nearly exploded in 1962. The seeds of the Cuban missile crisis lie in the story of the Cuban revolution, Fidel Castro's personality, and his embrace of the Soviet Union. Now Soviet-era

KGB records and Nikita Khrushchev's own office files, as well as interviews with key officials, can reveal the process by which Cubans first approached the Soviet Union and then Moscow championed Fidel. It all happened much earlier than Washington suspected and required Khrushchev's personal intervention.

The Cuban-Soviet compact, however, cannot alone account for the sleepless night of October 2, 1962, and those that followed. Thanks to the opening of Soviet files on the Cold War, we are on the verge of learning a lot more about American leaders than we thought possible. The Soviets were compulsive notetakers. The Kremlin viewed the outside world with morbid suspicion. Foreign service bureaucrats, including intelligence officers, knew that they would not get the benefit of the doubt if it was ever discovered that they were too close or too friendly with any foreigners, especially Americans. Consequently Soviet officials reported on all contacts with Americans and the substance of what those Americans said. Allowing for the possibility of bias, Soviet archives constitute a remarkable repository of every American initiative, probe, or gaff associated with the superpower relationship. In the case of John Kennedy, the new information reveals the extent to which he conducted a personal foreign policy toward the Soviet Union in the 1960s. This private policy, which centered on Robert Kennedy and a Soviet military intelligence officer, Georgi N. Bolshakov, shaped the Kremlin's understanding of the U.S. government and stood in stark contrast to John Kennedy's crusade to eliminate Fidel Castro. At best incompatible, the competing urges of the Kennedy White House alternately encouraged and provoked Khrushchev to realize his objective in America's backyard.

Colorful, impetuous, and ultimately driven by a sense of what was best for themselves and for their people, Castro, Khrushchev, and Kennedy inexorably collided. Castro wanted to lead a revolution throughout Latin America while keeping the Yankee colossus and democrats at bay. Khrushchev sought to equal and surpass the power of the United States in the name of ensuring the longevity of the Soviet Union and its vindication through emulation. And finally, John Kennedy, whose country was feared by Castro and Khrushchev, underestimated his own power and tried to gain quick victories through indirect means but, like the fabled Gulliver, ultimately found himself tied down by myriad concerns. This is a story of unintended consequences, in which as in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* the characters are neither heroes nor villains—just human beings, who are flawed, sometimes dangerously so, and whose dramatic risk taking created equally dramatic history.

THE EMBRACE

Overleaf:

Nikita Khrushchev meets Fidel Castro for the first time, in New York, September 1960. *Courtesy AP/Wide World Photos.*

“Where Does Castro Stand regarding Russia?”

Viva Fidel!

“Not since Sandino,” the *Nation* exclaimed, “has any Latin American figure so caught the imagination of the world as Fidel Castro.”¹ Norman Mailer called him “a modern Cortez.” Arriving at Washington’s National Airport on April 15, 1959, Castro embarked on a triumphant visit to the United States less than four months after overthrowing the Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista y Zalívar. The guest of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, Fidel Castro Ruz felt the time was right to bring his “Operation Truth” to the shores of his country’s greatest foreign policy problem.

Ironically in light of what American policy would become, the U.S. government’s greatest concern as the visit began was that Castro would be assassinated by a resentful Batistiano during his eleven-day tour. Like Mikhail Gorbachev nearly thirty years later, Fidel Castro gave the U.S. Secret Service fits by plunging into crowds, seeking to absorb every ounce of acclaim. At the National Airport he broke through a ring of security agents on his arrival to greet at least a thousand well-wishers pressing with their banners against the tarmac gates and chanting “Viva Fidel!” Fidel Castro was irrepressibly self-indulgent, and, after two years of running a revolutionary colony in the mountains before his triumphal entry into Havana, he was used to getting his way. Later Cuba would become a Soviet client, and protecting Castro’s life a concern of the KGB, and it would be the Russians who complained to Castro about taking these personal risks.² In April 1959 it was the U.S. government that had to hold its breath.

The enthusiasm of the crowd did not extend to the official U.S. delegation waiting near the plane. Castro’s chief greeter at the airport was the assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs, the seasoned diplomat and former Texas banker Richard Roy Rubottom, Jr., who had “grave doubts concerning the character and motivation” of this famous visitor.³ With some reluctance Dick Rubottom had recommended to Christian Herter, the acting secretary of state during John Foster Dulles’s illness, that special courtesies be accorded this “private visitor” to the United States. Rubottom considered Castro a “dangerous nationalist” and doubted that much could be done to alter his views on the United States.

Since 1957 Rubottom had actively participated in the Eisenhower administration’s debates over policy toward Cuba. Described by one historian of the Cuban revolution as “the U.S. official most responsible for defining U.S. Cuba policy,” Rubottom at the very least bore responsibility for consistently misreading the phenomenon of Fidel Castro.⁴ To his credit, Rubottom had been precise in taking the position in spring 1958 that Fulgencio Batista was vulnerable. Convinced that Batista had evolved into the worst kind of Latin despot—a leader offensive and corrupt enough to draw the ire

the American people but not powerful enough to stave off disorder in his own country—Rubottom was one of the first high-level foreign policy makers to argue that Batista should go.

Yet, for all his understanding of Batista, Rubottom had been slow to accept that Castro and his rebels would fill the coming vacuum. Castro, both the man himself and the political phenomenon he personified, perplexed the U.S. government. In two short years, after taking a handful of desperadoes into the mountains of southeastern Cuba, this former lawyer and social democrat had become the embodiment of opposition to the Batista regime. Castro's July 26 movement was a coalition of professionals and Cubans of all political persuasions who were tired of decades of authoritarianism and official corruption. Although an umbrella organization, the movement bore the stamp of Castro's larger-than-life personality. The movement took its name from the day in July 1953 when Fidel Castro first emerged on the Cuban scene by leading a band of badly armed men against the Cuban army at the Moncada barracks. Twenty-one people died in the attack, and Fidel and his younger brother, Raúl, were imprisoned for two years and then exiled because of it.⁵

Washington knew very little about Castro when he returned to the mountains of Cuba in late 1953 from his exile in Mexico. In the spring of 1957 Washington had sent an official fact-finding mission to the island to learn more about the rebel leader. Led by Lyman B. Kirkpatrick, Jr., a high-ranking officer of the Central Intelligence Agency, the delegation focused its efforts on Santiago de Cuba, the main town of Castro's home province, Oriente, where it was possible to meet people who knew Fidel Castro and could attest to his character and political philosophy.

In general, the Kirkpatrick team gathered encouraging information about Fidel and his family. The Castros, who owned one of the largest sugar plantations in Oriente, were prosperous. Born in 1926, one of seven children of Angel Castro and Lina Ruz Castro, Fidel grew up in a stately house, attended parochial schools, played baseball well, and ultimately graduated in law from the University of Havana. "He was a good Catholic boy," one of Castro's teachers, a cleric, told the delegation. In fact, all of his former teachers agreed that Castro could not be a communist. A Bryn Mawr alumna, Vilma Espín, future wife of Fidel's chief lieutenant and younger brother, Raúl, reinforced the image of the Castros as noncommunist progressives. "We only want," she said, "what you Americans have: clean politics, a clean police system." The American delegation found that the rebels had appealed to a desire in many Cubans, from all classes, who were tired of the Cuban dictatorship. The tour itself had been sponsored by the owner of Bacardi rum as a way of easing American anxieties about the Castro revolution. By the end of the trip, after meeting several lawyers, businessmen, and teachers, members of the delegation joked among themselves, "Doesn't anybody here support Batista?"⁶

Despite information from Cuba that the rebels were stronger and more popular than expected, the Eisenhower administration, especially the State Department, continued to hope in 1957 and 1958 that Batista might be able to save himself through constitutional reform. As for Castro, Washington officials remained cool. In early 1958 the United States demonstrated its preference by selling Batista some of the weapons that he wanted.⁷

The rebel leader had some allies in Washington, where Democrats in Congress and some foreign service officers were arguing for an arms embargo against Batista. But the tide of official opinion turned solidly against Castro when rebels under the command of his brother Raúl began to kidnap Americans in the summer of 1958. Eleven U.S. civilians who worked for a mining company were taken June 26. One day later the rebels grabbed twenty-four U.S. Navy enlisted men, including eleven marines. By June 30 the Cubans were holding nineteen American and Canadian civilians and thirty enlisted men of the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps.⁸ The rebels justified the kidnappings by pointing

Washington's continuing support for Batista. The U.S. naval base at Guantánamo, a constant reminder on Cuban soil of the era of Theodore Roosevelt's "big stick" diplomacy, was an especially sore spot for the Fidelistas. The rebels promised to release all of the hostages if Washington stopped the flow of weapons to Batista and vowed not to let the existing regime use the base as a staging ground for counterinsurgency operations.

The hostage incidents of 1958, which ended peacefully in mid-July, after Washington suspended the planned deliveries of military aircraft to Batista, predisposed the most powerful men in Washington to seek an alternative to the rebels. Despite some evidence of a rift between Raúl Castro, who claimed to have ordered the kidnappings, and a seemingly more moderate Fidel, the State Department encouraged the CIA to try to block Fidel Castro's ascension to power.⁹ On two occasions the CIA met with potential leaders of a new regime that would include neither Batista nor Fidel Castro. But these efforts came to nothing. Frustrated and resigned to an uncertain relationship with the Cuban leader, Rubottom admitted in executive session before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee just hours before Batista fled Havana at the stroke of midnight on January 1, 1959, "It has been hard to believe that the Castros alone, that the 26th of July Movement alone could take over...."¹⁰

Now Fidel Castro was arriving in Washington, D.C., as Cuba's newest strongman. Unlike his predecessors, this strongman had an enthusiastic American public following and apparent widespread support among his island's six million people. Seeing fifteen hundred people wait for two hours to catch a glimpse of Castro, Rubottom may have been wondering how long he would have to deal with this unusual man. It was rainy outside, these people were getting wet, and yet they waited. Perhaps he had misjudged the staying power of the charismatic Cuban leader. Rubottom could be excused for wishing that this be his only mistake in assessing the July 26 movement.

Operation Truth was to be a hectic, six-city tour across the northeastern United States and Canada. There had been widespread sympathy for Castro and the *barbudos*—the bearded ones—in January 1959. But in the three months since the takeover, the bloom was somewhat off the rose for many Americans. Reports of the execution of 521 former Batista officials, following summary war criminal trials, disappointed those who had expected the revolution to take a more moderate course. Reservations about Castro's democratic credentials, at first limited to the conservative *Herald* newspapers, could now also be found in the *Atlantic* and the *New Republic* magazines because Castro refused to name a date for elections. Castro saw this visit as an opportunity to reveal the "truth" about revolutionary Cuba. The people were in charge. They wanted justice, which meant bullets through the hearts of the venal and cruel men who had denied them freedom for so long, and they wanted bread, which mattered more to them than the ballot.

Castro did not expect to achieve much with men like Dick Rubottom. He explained to Cuban and American officials alike that he was going to the United States "not to get a change in the sugar quota or to get a government loan but to win the support ... from American public opinion."¹¹ Some on board the Cubana airlines flight from Havana were disappointed by their leader's dismissal of any negotiations with U.S. officials to lay the foundations for future economic assistance. But Castro feared American power. Cuba was already economically dependent on the United States. Sugar was Cuba's principal crop, and the country sold between 2.5 and 3 million metric tons of it (50–60 percent of the total production) to the United States every year at a subsidized price. North American subsidiaries employed 10 percent of all Cuban workers, and U.S. interests owned the island's utilities and most of its oil refineries, besides its main sugar plantations. Primarily as a result of U.S. direct investment, Cubans had the second-highest standard of living in Latin America and among the highest

literacy rates of any state in the region. However, the success of sugar discouraged the development of other industries and left thousands of Cubans unemployed outside of harvest season. Moreover, in the boom years just after World War II, the emergent Cuban middle class had developed a taste for American-made goods, which became so expensive with the downward slide of sugar prices in the mid-1950s that Cuban currency reserves plummeted as the domestic cost of living skyrocketed.¹²

Despite his privileged background and professional training, Castro lacked any sympathy for the plight of the middle class. His primary objective in the spring of 1959 was to decrease American leverage over Cuban affairs. Not wishing to antagonize Washington, Castro had intentionally brought a group of officials whose ideas on economic reconstruction and trade matched those of the Eisenhower administration. But he had no intention of acting on the economic liberalism of the moment on the plane with him.

“Where does Castro stand regarding Russia?” asked America’s most famous syndicated columnist Drew Pearson, on behalf of all official Washington. Pearson’s column, “Washington Merry-Go-Round,” arrived with coffee on the Cuban delegation’s first morning in the United States.¹³ The last person to be surprised by the question was Fidel Castro. He knew that in American eyes the acceptability of a Latin American regime depended upon its being perceived as noncommunist. Like all Latin American politicians of his generation, Castro was familiar with the cautionary tale of Guatemala’s Jacobo Arbenz and the U.S. role in the overthrow of his regime in 1954. Since 1933 through Franklin Roosevelt’s Good Neighbor Policy, the United States had pledged itself to a policy of nonintervention in Latin American countries. This rejection of Theodore Roosevelt’s 1904 assertion that the United States could intervene in the domestic affairs of other states in the Western Hemisphere became the basis of all inter-American relations in 1948 with the founding of the Organization of American States (OAS). However, at the 1954 OAS meeting in Caracas, Venezuela, the United States got the organization to accept a loophole in the pledge of nonintervention. According to what was known as the Caracas resolution, the members of the OAS were committed to joint action against any communist beachhead in the hemisphere. It was important for the young Castro regime to do everything necessary to prevent the Caracas resolution from being invoked, because this would give legitimacy to another Guatemalan-style covert operation.

As expected, the communism question dogged Castro throughout his hectic first day in Washington. After exhausting his staff, he slumped into a chair in the Cuban embassy in Dupont Circle to respond to one more attempt to peer inside his political soul. This time a Democratic congressman from Oregon, Charles Porter, was the one asking a variation on the Question: Is it true that the soldiers are learning Marxist doctrine in Havana? Castro had had a long day, and this set him off. “Do you believe that? This is my army. I started it from nothing and I control it.... Don’t you think I would be the first to be worried if I thought another power was taking it away from me?”¹⁴

Castro gave the same answer in various forms and at various times during the rest of his trip. “We are against all kinds of dictators.... That is why we are against Communism,” he told an audience at the National Press Club.¹⁵ At the United Nations he added that there were “no Communists” in the new Cuban government.¹⁶ And if there was any question about his brother Raúl Castro, who was not officially a member of the government, Fidel categorically denied on NBC’s *Meet the Press* that either Raúl or his wife was a communist. He allowed that there might well be some communists in the movement but held that “their influence is nothing.”¹⁷

The most famous test of Castro's connections to Moscow and communism came in Vice President Richard Nixon's small Senate office. Eisenhower had conveniently planned a trip to Georgia Augusta National, the home course of the Masters golf tournament, for the period of Castro's stay. It was decided that the vice president would greet the revolutionary.¹⁸ Years later Castro recalled the meeting as pleasant. Nixon did as Castro wanted: he let him talk. "I explained the social and economic situation in Cuba, the poverty, the inequality, the hundreds of thousands of unemployed, the landless peasants, the measures that we had to adopt to solve the situation—and Nixon listened, said nothing, and made no remarks."¹⁹

Crimson Dreams

Fidel Castro spent his last night in the United States at Harvard, as the guest of the university. The Faculty of Arts and Sciences's young, brilliant, and caustic dean, McGeorge Bundy, hosted Castro at a Faculty Club dinner. Though they came from very different backgrounds, the two men could at least exchange war stories. Lieutenant Bundy had waded ashore on Normandy in the Second World War. Castro's combat experiences, of course, were much fresher.

Sometime during the meal, Castro shared a curious confidence. In his six years as the chief academic officer and one of the intellectual leaders of Harvard, Bundy had welcomed many world leaders to the 325-year-old campus. Despite the notoriously strict admissions requirements of the school, it is safe to assume that few of them made a point of telling Bundy that they had actually applied to Harvard and not gotten in. Fidel Castro did.²⁰

A decade after being rejected by the Ivy League, Fidel Castro was in the United States to celebrate what he had managed to do with his life instead. Castro included Harvard, in addition to Princeton and Yale, on his swing along the East Coast to make his case before the next generation of the American elite. In New Jersey he had been mobbed. In the afternoon, at the Lawrenceville School, Castro surprised and impressed the schoolboys when he spoke to them in the chapel that they rushed from the back pews to claim the lighted cigar that he carelessly left behind on the lectern.²¹ Later at Princeton University, Castro was hoisted onto the shoulders of a group of Eating Club upperclassmen for a quick tour of the quadrangle. Yale apparently treated him more demurely. And as the Yale alumnus McGeorge Bundy checked his watch to be sure that his guest would not be late for the evening's scheduled event, he may well have wondered what Harvard had in store for the popular Cuban.

On an unseasonably warm April night, 8,700 members of the Harvard community gathered outside to greet Fidel. Side by side in a convertible, Castro and the Harvard dean were carried along the stream of people parading to the Dillon Field House. From a speaking platform in front of the building, Bundy used the story of Castro's failed application to introduce the revolutionary idea. Caught up in the exuberance of the event, he declared that Harvard was ready to make amends for its 1948 mistake. It had decided to admit him. How different the world might have been had Fidel Castro accepted a place in the Harvard class of 1963!²²

In Moscow it was twenty degrees colder and early the next morning when Castro started his speech at Harvard. Nikita Khrushchev had just made a decision that would help ensure that the lives of Fidel Castro and McGeorge Bundy, the future national security adviser of a future president, John F. Kennedy, would become deeply entwined. For thirty years neither Bundy nor any other American could have known that in the midst of Castro's successful Operation Truth the Kremlin was planning

covert operation to assist the Cuban army at the explicit request of the Cuban leader's brother Raúl.²³ As American journalists, officials, and students elicited repeated assurances from Fidel Castro of Cuba's independence from international communism, Raúl Castro was hard at work setting in motion a revolution in the relationship between Moscow and Havana. A secret member of the Cuban communist party—the Partido Socialista Popular (PSP)—the younger Castro had acquired de facto control of the Cuban armed services when his brother became prime minister. In April, Raúl Castro sent Lázaro Peña, a longtime PSP member and former president of the Cuban labor congress, to Moscow to ask for Soviet assistance in consolidating his control of the Cuban army. Raúl Castro said he needed a few men from the group of Spanish communists who had graduated from the Soviet military academy to act as advisers “to help the Cuban army ... on general matters and for the organization of intelligence work.”²⁴

Raúl's request found deep wells of support in Moscow. At sixty-five years of age, Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev was not much of a revolutionary, but he admired those who could make a revolution. As Joseph Stalin's successor, Khrushchev held two titles. He was both the general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Soviet Union. But it was as general secretary that Khrushchev made the Kremlin's most important decisions. In that post he headed the Presidium of the party's Central Committee, a group of about a dozen of the party's most powerful men, sometimes known collectively in Soviet history as the Politburo. In the forty years since Vladimir Lenin led the Bolsheviks to power in 1917, the Presidium or Politburo had directed Russian political life. Khrushchev joined the Communist Party a year after the October revolution and became a full member of the party's inner circle in the 1940s. The son of a Russian peasant living in the Ukraine, Khrushchev proved to be an adept party boss in Moscow. After Stalin's death in 1953, he outmaneuvered all other pretenders to the throne. From 1957 he was in sole command of the party and the government and had the ultimate say on any covert operations.

Khrushchev's Presidium approved Raúl Castro's petition on April 23, 1959, and instructed the International Department of the Central Committee, which handled relations among the various communist parties around the world, the Ministry of Defense, and the KGB to arrange with the leadership of the Spanish Communist Party to send two Spaniards to Cuba who had graduated from Soviet military academies.²⁵ The Ministry of Finance was also authorized to pay their salaries. A short while later the Presidium sent an additional detachment of fifteen Soviet officers of Spanish origin.²⁶ The Cuban army had very little money of its own, and the civilian leaders of the Cuban treasury, who were all anticommunists, were not to be told about this Soviet assistance.²⁷

A year earlier the Kremlin had been as poorly informed as Washington about Raúl's brother Fidel. For the most part, Stalin had left Latin America to the United States. It was America's backyard, too far away for a man who had never traveled outside his own sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. But under Khrushchev the Soviet Union looked for allies among the young nationalist leaders of what became known as the Third World.

The first serious contact between the Cuban rebels and the Kremlin had been indirect. In December 1958, representatives of a Costa Rican importing company, called Polini San José, approached the Czech embassy in Mexico to discuss “the supply of rifles, mortars and ammunition for the rebel detachments of Fidel Castro.” Prague, which since the late 1940s had not made any significant foreign policy decisions without checking first with Moscow, requested guidance on December 17, 1958. Having maintained links with young members of the Cuban communist party since at least the early 1950s, the Czechs wanted to help this shadowy “Costa Rican” group.²⁸

Believing that the Soviet Union had an obligation to take risks to support revolutionary movements around the world, the Kremlin on December 27, 1958, approved “the intention of the Czech friends help the liberation movement in Cuba.” As a way of minimizing the risk of disclosure, the Kremlin stipulated precautionary measures. “In no document should it be written,” Moscow instructed Prague “that the weapons delivery was destined for the Cubans.” Ever mindful of traps sprung by the CIA, the Presidium wanted the Czechs “to verify painstakingly the seriousness of intent of the company before going ahead with the deal. And in the spirit of preventive damage control, the Soviets decided that no Soviet-made weapons could be sent. The Czechs were told to restrict assistance to World War II-era German weapons or weapons of Czech design. It was assumed that if Washington found out about the shipment, those kinds of weapons would be easier for President Dwight Eisenhower to swallow.”²⁹

Contacts between the revolutionaries and Moscow became more direct following the sudden collapse of the Batista regime on New Year’s Day 1959. Offering itself as a channel to the new leadership in Havana, the PSP sent a series of emissaries to the Kremlin. In March 1959 a representative of the PSP met with the chief of staff of the Soviet armed forces, Marshal V. Sokolovsky, to discuss future relations between the two armed services.³⁰ A month later, in addition to what he brought from Raúl Castro, Lázaro Peña conveyed a request from the secretary general of the PSP, Blas Roca, to encourage the Soviets to “develop economic relations with Cuba ... to buy Cuban sugar and to provide the country with manufacturing and agricultural equipment.”³¹

There were limits to what the Kremlin was prepared to do for the Havana revolutionaries in the spring of 1959. Cuban requests for assistance in building a loyal revolutionary army met with Moscow’s approval. While the Presidium was favorably discussing the dispatch of advisers to Raúl Castro, Marshal Sokolovsky raised with a PSP representative the possibility of training Cuban pilots and asked about the communists’ goals for the army. However, Cuban feelers in behalf of an expansion of economic relations went unsupported by the Soviet Presidium, as did a request for Moscow to unleash its propaganda organs in support of Fidel. The editor of *Pravda* told a PSP visitor from Havana that the Cuban communist party should leave well enough alone. “Things are going well there, and American imperialists might use these *Pravda* articles for future attacks on the democratic structure of Cuba. If matters begin to deteriorate in Cuba, then *Pravda* would provide more information and publish expressions of solidarity.”³²

A lack of confidence in the orientation of the Cuban revolution inspired this caution in Moscow. Despite adherents like Raúl Castro, the communists were far from wielding complete control over the new government. Not one of the high-level PSP emissaries who had come to Moscow since January 1959 even pretended to speak on behalf of Fidel Castro. The Cuban communist leaders all boasted having “influenced” Castro, but no one dared call him a communist or a Marxist. In fact, what claims they did make contained hidden warnings of Fidel Castro’s self-possession and unbridled revolutionary energy. In February, Severro Aguirre had argued that the PSP deserved credit for the triumph of the revolution, because the party had effectively contained some of Castro’s wilder urges. “The actions of Fidel Castro, who employed individualistic terror in the beginning of his struggle against tyranny in the mountains,” the Cuban communists explained in Moscow, “interfered with the work of the PSP.” “We did everything,” Aguirre boasted, “such that Fidel Castro would drop these methods.” And the implication was that Castro had done so and that subsequently the revolution had picked up steam. Yet this claim naturally left Moscow wondering whether Fidel Castro was indeed capable of the discipline required of a communist.³³

The central problem for Moscow in 1959, as for Washington, was making sense of Fidel Castro and his revolution. Of the sixteen men who went into the Sierra Maestra in Oriente Province in 1956, fourteen were communists. Yet there was an enduring mistrust between the rank and file of the July 26 movement and the party. The PSP had denounced the 1953 attack on the Moncada barracks as “adventurist” and as “a putschist method peculiar to all bourgeois political factions.”³⁴ After the surviving rebels were thrown in jail and exiled to Mexico, the PSP restored contact with the Castro brothers.³⁵ But again in 1956 Blas Roca and Lázaro Peña expressed disagreement with Fidel Castro’s timetable for grabbing power.

Besides Raúl Castro, Ernesto Guevara was the other highly placed communist in the rebel movement. A trained physician, the Argentine native served as the only doctor among the small group of rebels who sailed to Cuba from Mexico aboard the *Granma* in 1956. Rushing around the slopes looking for medicine, Guevara unsuccessfully tried to calm the churning stomachs of the eighty-two heavily armed rebels on the passage to Oriente Province. Better known by the nickname Che, Guevara despised the PSP for the same reasons he loved Fidel Castro and the other vomit-caked men suffering on the ship. The Cuban communist elite were “talmudists” and bureaucrats, little more than bystanders waiting for history to give them their moment instead of forcing change with revolutionary élan.³⁶ Grudgingly perhaps, and with Raúl’s encouragement, Che joined the Cuban communist party in 1957, when it appeared that some in the PSP leadership were reconsidering their opposition to armed revolution.

Roca, Peña, and Aguirre were very different kinds of communists from Raúl and Che. They had Stalinist views on the proper way for a state to achieve socialism. Even in the Third World, where there were few industrial urban centers, true socialism in their minds required a proletariat, and a proletariat was impossible without an industrial capitalist economy. Che and Raúl belonged instead to a generation shaped by Mao Zedong’s victory in China in 1949. By deploying a peasant army as the vanguard of a Chinese communist state, Mao effectively challenged Soviet theories of building socialism. To be successful, a revolution did not need a working class. Maoism, as these theories of armed rebellion became known, seemed more conducive to the conditions of the developing world and to the instincts of men like Che and Raúl.

The old leaders of the PSP put doctrinal matters aside once Raúl Castro’s brother garnered mass support from his base in the Sierra Maestra. Although still a long shot, a victory by Fidel’s July 26 movement would be the best opportunity ever presented to the PSP to expand its influence in Cuba. Organized in 1919, the party became such a formidable electoral machine that in 1940 a young sergeant named Batista had offered some seats in the cabinet to the general secretary of the PSP, Blas Roca. When Batista came to power a second time, in 1952, he outlawed the communist party, forcing Roca and the other old communists to go into six years of underground work.

Although they would never get over their distrust of Che, the old PSP leaders thought highly of Raúl Castro. Raúl had joined the party years before the revolution, when a student at the University of Havana in the early 1950s. An idealist who rejected his parents’ upper-middle-class lifestyle, Raúl came to identify with the workers on his father’s plantation. At the University of Havana he read voraciously and acquired a command of the Marxist canon. Raúl Valdés Vivo, who headed the socialist youth group at the university, befriended the young Raúl and recruited him.³⁷ Fearful of his brother’s reaction, Raúl said to Blas Roca that he never told Fidel about his membership in the youth league or, later, in the PSP itself. Fidel, who attended the university a few years before Raúl, had socialized with members of the youth league but refused to join them. He rejected the stifling party

discipline and believed that Cuba's injustices could be solved only through action and violence. Knowing Fidel's dislike for the PSP, Raúl was convinced that his suspicious brother would view his membership as a sign of divided loyalties.

It may seem fantastic that Raúl Castro could keep his membership in the Cuban communist party secret from his mistrustful brother. In the Sierra Maestra, Fidel told an American newsman, "[Raúl] always consults me about all the important questions."³⁸ Yet when Raúl took a group of American marines hostage in the summer of 1958, Fidel behaved as if his brother had exceeded his instructions. Raúl was capable of independent action. The brothers had a tempestuous relationship. The older Fidel patronized Raúl, describing him to outsiders as "extraordinarily respectful," while admiring him for his intelligence. Raúl was better read and probably more clever than his brother. Physically underdeveloped, he did not project the machismo of Fidel. The importance of such things was that it fed in Raúl a certain insecurity, which was occasionally manifest in acts of cruelty. Raúl was beside Fidel on every rung of the ladder to power. During the revolution he replaced Fidel as chief military officer in Oriente Province when the movement pushed closer to the Cuban capital. After the fall of Batista, Raúl was the first rebel commander to initiate revolutionary tribunals for opponents of the revolution. Fidel asked the July 26 movement to recognize Raúl as his heir apparent, and, after becoming prime minister in February, he brought him to Havana.

Knowledge of Raúl's secret formed the basis of Soviet treatment of both Castros in the months after the revolution.³⁹ The secret was closely held in Moscow. Mid-level documents from the Foreign Ministry or the Central Committee referred to him only as a "leftist" or a "supporter of the unified left."⁴⁰ But when members of Khrushchev's inner cabinet discussed Cuba, they believed they had a special ally in Raúl, who had to be protected from his brother. "[W]e knew that Raúl Castro was a good communist," Khrushchev later recalled, "but it appeared that he kept his true convictions hidden from his brother Fidel."⁴¹

Where's Fidel?

Since Kremlin records do not mention Fidel Castro in connection with the sending of Spanish communists to train the new Cuban army, it remains a matter of speculation as to when Raúl told Fidel of the success of Peña's mission. Could Raúl have kept this a secret, as he did his communist affiliation? As we shall see, the KGB, at least, believed that Fidel did not learn about his brother's communist loyalties until 1962, during something called the Escalante affair, which ripped open the PSP.⁴² However, in light of the role that Fidel permitted even overt communists to play in his government as early as May 1959, it seems likely that Raúl was fully authorized to open this channel to Moscow, that Fidel and the commander in chief of the Rebel Army, Camilo Cienfuegos Gorriarán, wanted veterans of the Spanish civil war to train Cuban recruits.

If Mao's achievements in China were the beacon of hope for young Latin American revolutionaries in the 1950s, the CIA's overthrow of Guatemala's Jacobo Arbenz in 1954 was the most powerful cautionary tale of Raúl and Fidel Castro's generation. After his election in 1952, Arbenz moved to implement radical social and political reforms. A Marxist, though not necessarily pro-Moscow, Arbenz included members of the Guatemalan communist party in his inner circle. By 1954 the Eisenhower administration had determined that it could no longer countenance Arbenz as leader of Guatemala. With the support of moderate, Catholic, and conservative interests in the government and the army, Washington undermined Arbenz's hold on power. In June 1954, under pressure from a small

band of rebels whose numbers were exaggerated by CIA radio stations, the Guatemalan army collapsed, prompting Arbenz to resign. The essential lesson for the Castros and Che, who was actually in Guatemala at the time of the coup, was that purging and rebuilding the army would have to be a priority in the first months of power. Fidel Castro doubtless knew of the arrival of the Spanish communist military advisers and accepted them as a necessary preventive measure.

There exists the intriguing possibility that Fidel Castro learned of this first high-level contact between the Kremlin and his regime in Boston just before meeting the young Harvard dean McGeorge Bundy on April 25, 1959. Rufo López Fresquet, the Cuban finance minister, who accompanied Fidel to the United States, recalls a long-distance telephone call from Raúl on April 24 or April 25. Whatever Raúl said infuriated Fidel. López Fresquet heard some of the shouting, prompted by Raúl's concern that Fidel was letting "them" seduce him. López Fresquet believed that Raúl Castro had called to advise his brother to tone down his pro-American rhetoric, but in light of new Soviet records the timing of the call may have been linked to the news that on April 23 the Kremlin had decided to provide secret assistance to the revolution. In any case, the incident reflected Raúl's misgivings about his brother's mission to America, at a time when he was hopeful of Soviet sponsorship of the new government.

In Fidel Castro's absence Raúl reinforced the significance of his secret diplomacy by establishing himself as the regime's main critic of the United States. On April 20 he told students at Havana University that "enemies of the Cuban revolution" were in the pay of the United States. He directed attention to comments by Senator George Smathers of Florida, who had proposed an international police force to maintain security in the Caribbean. Raúl decried this as a covert attempt to establish a force to invade Cuba on the slimmest pretext. Knowing the mistrust that many inside Cuba felt for the communists, Raúl combined his anti-American diatribe with an explanation that it was "stylish" to attack him as a communist. He warned the crowd that these calumnies were part of a concerted campaign by those who would do harm to the revolution.⁴³

Whereas Raúl Castro excelled at explaining what the revolution was not, Che Guevara spoke confidently to the Cuban people in Fidel Castro's absence of what the revolution could become. When Fidel decided not to return to Havana to lead May Day celebrations, Che stepped into the spotlight. Already responsible for political indoctrination in the army, Che introduced the notion of a militia of part-time soldiers, culled from the peasantry, urban workers, and students, dedicated to fighting for the revolution against all comers. Che also dared praise communists as "revolutionists," while in the same breath he advocated diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, a topic Fidel had studiously avoided in public.⁴⁴

Although Raúl Castro and Che Guevara spoke of the revolution as if they alone understood it, both men misjudged their power at this moment to shape Cuban events. The elder Castro was not yet ready to establish formal, public ties with the Soviet Union or even the local PSP. When Fidel Castro returned to Cuba from his long trip, which he had ended in Argentina by calling on the United States to create a \$30 billion fund for public works in Latin America, the Cuban leader set himself up as a public opponent of the very ideas that his brother and Che had touted only days before. Describing his trip to North and South America as "successful and gratifying," Castro said that he had not expected that in the United States the "people would have responded so enthusiastically and with such comprehension." This is not what Raúl had said. Fidel then gored Che's bull. "There should be no formal militia organized in peacetime," he said. Instead, there should be a "small, well trained, mobile professional army." Castro ended his marathon speech on May 10, stating his hope for good relations with all of the Americas. He vowed to defeat those who hoped to use Cuba as a staging ground for

expeditions to overthrow existing governments, and he welcomed official U.S. contributions to Latin American development.⁴⁵

Fidel Castro's actions were contradictory, suggesting complex motives. While attacking Guevara's militia plan, Castro endorsed in May 1959 a land reform system designed by the PSP and assigned well-known Cuban communists to leadership positions in the organization, the National Institute of Agrarian Reform (INRA), created to supervise the reform. The Agrarian Reform Law limited property holdings to 3,333 acres, effectively cutting the size of the country's largest sugar plantations and cattle ranches by more than 90 percent. Approximately 2.5 million acres of land came under the regime's control in this manner.⁴⁶ At the same time, Castro apparently did nothing to obstruct the political and technical work of the advisers sent by the Spanish communist party to the Cuban army.

Despite these gains Raúl Castro and Che Guevara were furious at Fidel Castro's public vacillation. Fidel had humiliated them in front of the Cuban people and through his speeches had also encouraged the anticommunist left in the July 26 movement. Raúl briefly contemplated splitting the rebel movement to demonstrate to his brother that he needed the communist wing to govern.⁴⁷ Che reacted openly and harshly. He threatened Fidel with emigration from Cuba if the militia proposal was not approved.⁴⁸ Castro was shaken by the opposition of his closest allies. He was torn between his dependence on them and his own sense of how to hold on to power in Cuba. It is not known whether this was Fidel's idea, but within a few weeks Che was sent on a long "commercial mission" to Europe and Asia. Before leaving, Che married his longtime mistress. Raúl served as his best man, but Fidel did not bother to come.⁴⁹

The threat of a split between Raúl, Che, and Fidel Castro worried the leadership of the PSP, which believed that Moscow's support against U.S. intervention was predicated on communists' remaining in Fidel's inner circle. "We need solidarity now more than ever before," warned Blas Roca on a trip to Moscow in June 1959.⁵⁰ Fidel had hurt the revolutionary cause by making some anticommunist statements in the United States and in Cuba. But the cause was not lost. The PSP, he explained, had persuaded Fidel that his anti-communist rhetoric was harmful to the revolution and a change in his speeches was already noticeable. Roca said nothing about the workers' militia; but he tried to assure Moscow that Fidel was still sympathetic to PSP. Roca claimed to enjoy his support and stressed the risks that Castro had already taken in behalf of progressive reform. Hinting at the old adage "The enemy of my enemy is my friend," Roca emphasized that the United States was using the agrarian reform program to pummel the regime.⁵¹ Moscow listened sympathetically but did nothing to increase its minor covert assistance to Havana.

After Fidel Castro left the United States, Assistant Secretary of State Dick Rubottom reflected on the strengths and weaknesses that Castro had shown during his visit. He had said much to allay suspicion that he was pro-Soviet, but despite Castro's direct denials of any brief for communists or communism, Rubottom had his doubts. Why proclaim a desire for independence and then welcome communists into your government, some of whom might be pro-Soviet? Perhaps Castro wanted to avoid seeming too friendly toward the United States, for fear of undermining his nationalist and revolutionary credentials. At the end of the day Rubottom concluded that Castro remained "an enigma."⁵²

From Rubottom to Eisenhower no one in the U.S. government knew the steps the Kremlin had taken during Castro's trip to solidify its relations with Raúl Castro and the Cuban army. This information would have helped the administration fend off criticisms that Washington had squandered a good opportunity to improve relations with the Cuban leadership. The American left, in particular, believed

that Fidel considered himself mistreated in the United States. Had Dwight Eisenhower only put himself out to greet the Cuban prime minister, it was argued, instead of playing golf at Augusta National in Georgia, then Castro might have formed a better image of this country.

Castro's visit did indeed mark a watershed. His public relations campaign across North and South America, however limited in scope, had revealed strains among his key men in Havana. Raúl Castro and Che Guevara were determined to exploit the chaos in Cuba following the rebels' seizure of power to lay down the structures of a Marxist-Leninist state and told Castro that they would resist any opening to Washington. Fidel had a choice to make in the months to come. He was no Marxist ideologue. In fact, simply put, he was the first Fidelista. Castro believed himself to be the embodiment of the Cuban nation and the inheritor of the mantle of Simón Bolívar. His challenge was to find a course of action that guaranteed him continued control over the revolution and the destiny of his people. At the same time, the challenge for Raúl and Che would be to convince this man that the future prospects of his regime and his movement depended on creating a much closer relationship with Moscow and Beijing. As of the summer of 1959 the Kremlin could do little but watch and wait for Fidel Castro to decide his next move.

Our Man in Havana

Mixed Signals

A rumor that Raúl Castro was prepared to overthrow his less doctrinaire brother reached Moscow in the late spring of 1959.¹ While interested in knowing whether this was true, the Kremlin had no way of evaluating any information on this peculiar revolution. Aside from the sporadic accounts of PSIA visitors to Moscow, the Soviet government seems not to have had any intelligence assets on the island. A month after the rebel victory, the KGB tried to send an intelligence officer, under the cover of a correspondent for the Soviet state radio, to Havana. But the Cuban Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which was still under the control of the anticommunist wing of the July 26 movement, refused to grant him a visa.²

Without any direct communication to the new leaders in Cuba, the Soviets developed a confused picture of the state of affairs on the island. The charismatic Fidel Castro seemed to be in control; but it was unclear what kind of regime he intended to create. Information that Raúl Castro and Che Guevara were secret members of the Cuban communist party suggested that the revolution might take a sharp turn to the left; but as yet Fidel Castro himself had made no effort to show his cards.

One person who could help the Soviets understand the real Fidel Castro, if he would talk, was Che Guevara. Following Castro's refusal in May to establish a popular militia, which for Guevara and Raúl Castro was the symbol of the coming socialist revolution, Che had gone into voluntary exile as Cuba's traveling commercial attaché. Egypt was Che's first port of call. Gamal Abdel Nasser, a hero to the Castros for having struck a blow at European colonialism by nationalizing the Suez Canal in 1956, tried to warn the young Cuban revolutionary not to make the mistake of exchanging one form of dependency for another. Nasser reportedly told Che Guevara that "if one dealt with the imperialists one would suffer a five per cent loss in one's resources. However, if one dealt with the Communists one would lose one hundred per cent of his assets."³ The Egyptian leader, who had learned some hard lessons through personal experience, had reason to wonder whether these eager young Cuban revolutionaries knew how to deal with a superpower with caution and without sacrificing autonomy.

Over the course of the next two months, Che Guevara pointedly stayed away from socialist countries to avoid raising suspicions in Washington. But he had every intention of probing the communist world in search of moral and material benefits for Cuba. In almost every capital on his itinerary, Che spent time with the local Soviet and Eastern bloc representatives, while keeping a low profile. And as he made his rounds, the Kremlin received reports on his comments. In general, Che was telling Soviet officials that Moscow had a new ally in the developing world but that this alliance would require assistance different in kind from that given to Egypt or Indonesia, recipients of the

largest amount of Soviet aid in the Third World. Cuba had to worry about economic rebuilding and was not interested in military procurement. Alternately stroking and chiding the Soviets, Che expressed Cuba's profound interest in expanding commercial relations with the East, while sharply criticizing the Soviets for their often maladroit handling of Third World regimes. In a July meeting with the Soviet ambassador to Japan, Che invited the Kremlin to start trade negotiations with Cuban representatives in London. "Guevara remarked," the ambassador reported, "that negotiations and contracts must be open."⁴ Che also made a point of telling Moscow how important it was that it send someone to these talks who spoke Spanish fluently. Not only was he interested in ensuring Moscow respect for the Spanish language and Cuban sovereignty; he also shared the rebels' mistrust of the Cuban foreign service. Unlike the veteran staff in the Cuban embassies abroad, the loyal revolutionaries now being sent overseas probably would not know any foreign languages.

Guevara wanted the Kremlin to know that, despite the early setbacks, Fidel's communist allies in the July 26 movement fully intended to build socialism. But their byword had to be "Exercise caution." As Che explained to the Soviet ambassador in Japan, a "rapprochement with socialist countries" had to be "gradual ... because the enemies of the revolution will try to use every sign to obstruct domestic affairs on the pretext of a communist threat in Cuba." Che had learned his lesson in May. Perhaps speaking to himself as much as to the Kremlin, the thirty-year-old former guerrilla explained that "[o]ne must have endurance, toughness, and consistency to carry out revolutionary policies in Cuba."⁵

Meanwhile, the news from Cuba indicated that Raúl Castro's influence had recovered from the fraternal spat over militia policy and public treatment of the communism question. Over the objections of the noncommunist left in the July 26 movement, Fidel Castro had chosen Osvaldo Dorticós, a lawyer who drafted the agrarian reform legislation, to replace Manuel Urrutia as Cuban president in July 1959. A member of the PSP since 1953, Dorticós was Raúl Castro's candidate. Although the position was largely ceremonial, its capture by a party member shored up the faith of PSP leaders that the revolution would ultimately go their way.⁶

Doing the Can-Can

Nikita Khrushchev did not appreciate seeing the actress Shirley MacLaine's white bloomers. Invited by executives at Twentieth Century-Fox to visit the sound studio where the cast members of *Can-Can* were rehearsing in September 1959, Khrushchev noticeably tensed up when the leggy MacLaine and members of the chorus line began twirling their skirts in the air. Disgusted, the Soviet leader told his patrician escort, Henry Cabot Lodge, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, that "he could not understand how good and hard working people could indulge in such entertainment." He was coming to the end of an unprecedented ten-day, coast-to-coast tour of the "Main Adversary." Besides the wearying effect of so many new experiences over such a short period of time, the trip was depressing Khrushchev's natural optimism about the triumph of communism. The *Can-Can* episode presented Khrushchev with an opportunity to let off steam about the intimidating vitality and resources of the country he was now visiting for the first time. "[It was] the extreme abundance of wealth in the United States," he told Lodge, "which made the people look for such unusual entertainment."⁷

In a less dramatic and embittered fashion, Khrushchev took Lodge aside at the end of his California stay to reveal his new thinking about the challenges he faced as an opponent of the United States. "[T]he Soviet Union has never denied that the United States had the highest standard of life and the

most efficient methods of production in the world, and that was the reason why it had chosen the United States as its partner for competition.” Backing away from public claims to the contrary, a uncharacteristically humbled Khrushchev added that he didn’t think the Soviet Union could catch up with the United States by 1970; although it might be able to catch up in the total volume of production, it wouldn’t be able to catch up as far as per capita production was concerned.⁸

While Khrushchev fretted about growth rates, back in Moscow that third week of September 1958 the Presidium was having its own hard time deciding whether the socialist bloc should challenge the American colossus in the Caribbean. The Cubans were trying to buy weapons from the Polish government, and Warsaw had appealed to Moscow for guidance. Even though Khrushchev and his minister of foreign affairs, Andrei Gromyko, were in the United States, the remainder of the Presidium felt it had to prepare an answer for the Poles, who had brought the issue to the Kremlin’s attention.

The Polish ambassador in Moscow had presented the Kremlin with a tangled tale. The Cubans used their legation in Switzerland to quietly purchase supplies from the Polish government. Up to this point the Cubans had restricted their requests to consumer goods. But now they were asking the Polish ambassador in Bern to cable Warsaw for permission to supply weapons. This was the first time the Cubans had looked for military assistance from a communist country since Castro took over. Once again they expected to resort to a covert operation to bring the arms without alerting the United States. The Cubans controlled an Austrian company that could buy weapons from Poland.

The Poles reacted to this in the same manner as the Czechs in December 1958. Like Czechoslovakia, Poland would not consider providing military assistance to Castro without the Kremlin’s approval. Accordingly, in mid-September the Polish ambassador in Moscow requested advice from the Soviet government as to whether Poland should supply weapons that had been manufactured under Soviet license.⁹

The Presidium got conflicting advice from the foreign policy bureaucracies of the government and the Communist Party. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, under Deputy Minister Valerian Zorin’s leadership in Gromyko’s absence, expressed serious misgivings, fearing that a misstep in a minor relationship with Cuba would harm the “spirit of Camp David.” Discussions between Khrushchev and Eisenhower at the presidential retreat symbolized for some in Moscow a new level of civility and mutual understanding between the superpowers. The Committee on Foreign Economic Relations of the Central Committee of the CPSU joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in underscoring for the Presidium the possibility that this Cuban request was actually a provocation designed by “adversaries of the lessening of international tensions and the improvement of relations between the Soviet Union and the United States.”¹⁰ The memorandum recalled that Che Guevara had not once raised the question of military assistance with any of the Soviet representatives he met in the course of his globetrotting. Finally, the memorandum added disingenuously that it seemed suspicious that an Austrian company and not a Cuban representative would request the weapons.

Khrushchev’s successful trip was cause for many in the Kremlin to reconsider taking any chances with Fidel Castro. The issue of the Austrian company’s bona fides was a transparent ploy. The Cost Rican firm used by the Cubans in 1958, when the Kremlin approved the sale of Czech weapons, had been just as unknown. But although it called Prague’s attention to the possibility of trouble, the Presidium had not ruled out using a private firm. This time there was significant opposition to sending weapons to the Cubans, opposition inspired by concern over the possible consequences for U.S.-Soviet relations if word of the decision to arm Castro ever leaked to Washington. Gromyko’s people knew

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