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People sit in a bus heading to see the ashes of Cuba's leader Fidel Castro in Bartolome Maso, on the foothills of Sierra Maestra, Cuba, Friday, Dec. 2, 2016. Castro's ashes are on a four-day journey across Cuba from Havana to their final resting place in the eastern city of Santiago. (AP Photo/Ricardo Mazalan)

Here is a convincing recent thinkpiece from Isabel Hilton, published in *Prospect*, on the paradoxical role implacable US opposition to Fidel Castro played in helping consolidate and later prop up his dictatorial regime.

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significant errors of US foreign policy. Washington viewed such movements exclusively through the distorting lens of superpower rivalry, casting Moscow as the arch manipulator of every local and regional movement that manifested antipathy to the United States or its interests. It led the US to argue the virtues of democracy while simultaneously propping up right-wing dictatorships from Chile to the Philippines."

The paradox of US foreign policy on Cuba

It created what it aimed to destroy—a hostile, pro-Soviet, long-lived regime built around Fidel Castro

Isabel Hilton, Prospect, 28 December 2016

It was the early 1990s. I was in Havana, on one of several frustrating reporting trips. Cuba then was an unrewarding place for a journalist to visit: the Party elite was all but impossible to meet, and if you succeeded, they spoke in the dead language of the Communist bureaucrat. The result was a notebook full of unusable political sloganising.

To call Cuba's press operation unhelpful would be to pay it a compliment: accepting a minder was a condition of a journalist's visa, but minders would vanish for days on end, wasting precious reporting time. Calls to them went unanswered or unreturned, the Cuban press was brain-crushingly uninformative, and blanket state surveillance served as a strong disincentive for ordinary Cubans to speak to foreign journalists.

It was before everybody had mobile phones, so waiting for the minder's call back entailed long hours in stale hotel rooms. I filled some of those hours watching Fidel Castro on a fuzzy

black-and-white TV set. He was reading what seemed to be the world’s longest shopping list.

Cuba was hungry. The Soviet Union had collapsed and had taken with it a cozy trading system that allowed Castro to supply sugar at inflated prices in exchange for pretty much everything that Cuba needed at preferential rates. When it collapsed, Cuba lost around 80 per cent of both imports and exports, and GDP dropped by more than 30 per cent. Fidel was explaining to his people why the shelves were empty and were likely to remain so for some time, a task that took several hours.

The shopping list included, importantly, oil and petrochemicals: bicycles were soon to make their appearance on the streets of Havana, posing a lethal hazard in a city in which the street lighting had gone dark. But Castro’s interminable speech was testament to Cuba’s comprehensive dependency on the Soviet bloc: it included everything from matches to motor parts, powdered milk to wheat; kerosene to medicine, soap to agricultural machinery. Cuba’s neighbourhood supermarket had closed and its credit was no good at any other.

Thus began the “special period” of material hardship that gave hope to optimists in Miami that this time, Fidel Castro’s regime would surely collapse. It was, after all a moment—now rather distant—in which liberal democracies congratulated themselves on their victory in the long struggle against totalitarianism. Commentators were casting around the surviving regimes, speculating on who would be next.

For my friends in Cuba these were hard times. One couple whom I had got to know well had started out as supporters of the revolution and had lived scrupulously by its rules. As young people, they had volunteered in literacy programmes and contributed to the once vibrant cultural life of Havana. Neither had contacts with exiles across the water; none of

their family members had sought to escape; they had put their shoulders to the wheel to build the new Cuba. Both were well respected in their professions—one a television director, the other a cultural critic and broadcaster—but they lived in a house so dilapidated that it seemed as though banging the front door might bring it crashing down.

Holding hard currency had been a crime, and although a few special dollar shops had opened up, the stigma of the Miami connection had persisted. Now, though, Cubans with relatives abroad and access to dollars were becoming a new elite. Those who had none were forced to rely on a meagre and intermittent state ration system. In Havana's hotels, highly trained professionals jostled for shifts carrying luggage for tourists, in the hope of harvesting a few dollars in tips. Young Cuban women could be seen entwined around excited male tourists and public spaces became theatres of prostitution. Havana seemed to be spiralling back to pre-revolutionary days, when vice and organised crime ruled the city.

Yet Castro's regime did not collapse. Then, as at every other point of crisis in his long reign, Fidel was saved by the unremitting hostility of the United States, giving him a ready scapegoat for Cuba's domestic privations and an overwhelming argument for resistance. His popular appeal remained embedded in Cuba's fierce nationalism and the more impatient the US calls for his departure, the firmer his grip.

Much ink has been spilled over the intriguing question of whether it might have been different—whether Fidel was a Communist from the beginning and the Cuban revolution always destined to turn to Moscow. Both Cuban revolutionaries and US Cold Warriors had reason to argue that he was, and, in the absence of available Cuban archives on the subject, the question may never be definitively settled. But it is intriguing to reflect on the possibility that, had the Eisenhower administration played its cards differently, it might have avoided having and spared subsequent

administrations five decades of provocation from a Soviet ally 90 miles off its coast, whose example inspired anti-American movements around the world.

There is evidence in support of both positions: the young revolutionary Fidel Castro was not a member of the Cuban Communist Party and his 26 July Movement encompassed a range of political views, bound together by a hatred of President Batista. The Cuban Communist Party strongly disapproved of what they saw as Fidel's bourgeois adventurism. He overthrew a dictator whom the US had supported for far too long, but perhaps a friendlier reception by Washington would have kept Fidel from turning to Moscow.

The US was in the grip of a ferocious anti-Communism that would produce, among other things, the McCarthy hearings, but it did not seem unremittingly opposed to the Cuban revolution at the beginning. Washington recognised the new order within days and regarded Fidel as more politically moderate than his brother Raul, a misapprehension that persisted for decades.

Richard Nixon, then Eisenhower's vice-president and himself an enthusiastic Cold Warrior, met Castro in April 1959. He wrote in his memoirs that he had identified Castro in that meeting as a man the US should not do business with, but in this, as in other things, Nixon's word is unreliable. A memo that he wrote at the time suggests a more sympathetic view.

Nixon was deeply impressed by Castro's leadership qualities. "The one fact we can be sure of," he wrote, "is that he has those indefinable qualities which make him a leader of men. Whatever we may think of him he is going to be a great factor in the development of Cuba and very possibly in Latin American affairs generally. He seems to be sincere; he is either incredibly naive about Communism or under Communist discipline—my guess is the former… But because he has the power to lead… we have no choice but at least to try to orient him in the right direction."

But by March 1960, Eisenhower had decided to try to overthrow Fidel and economic sanctions were imposed. The following year, Fidel declared himself a Marxist-Leninist. The well-known catalogue of CIA-sponsored farce, from exploding cigars to the Bay of Pigs, duly followed. The fact that Castro was—or would become—a dictator was not the point: the US went on installing and supporting dictators throughout the period, so long as they were, to paraphrase the words of diplomat Jeanne Kirkpatrick, some version of "our son-of-a-bitch." But Castro's strength lay in not being a US "son-of-a-bitch." The ideological overlay always came a poor second to his nationalism.

How might it have looked from Castro's perspective? Fidel clearly benefitted from US animosity as he consolidated his power, eliminating his rivals and growing into the mythologised liberator, a familiar Latin American character. Where does nationalism get its energy and legitimacy, after all, if not from the threats of the hegemon, and what greater excuse could there be for domestic repression than the permanent national emergency of US aggression?

Even if that attitude was not embedded from the start, Fidel had plenty of evidence that the US had little compunction about overthrowing elected governments that tried to assert national against its corporate interests. Fidel's triumph came only five years after the US-sponsored coup against the elected leader of Guatemala, Jacobo Arbenz, who had had the temerity to propose that the American company United Fruit should pay tax. (Guatemala subsequently suffered three decades of military dictatorship and a protracted civil war that cost tens of thousands of lives.)

Nevertheless, has Washington's door remained open, Cuba might have normalised. It was the most prosperous country in the region and the one with intimate ties to it giant neighbour. But as time went by, the US did Fidel the further service of focussing its animus increasingly on his person, even more

than his professed ideology. In 1996, long after the collapse of the USSR, Bill Clinton signed the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act, barring any US president from lifting sanctions on Cuba as long as Fidel was in power. What greater endorsement could they have given him?

Mishandling the developing world nationalism that was such a pervasive phenomenon of the post-war world was one of the significant errors of US foreign policy. Washington viewed such movements exclusively through the distorting lens of superpower rivalry, casting Moscow as the arch manipulator of every local and regional movement that manifested antipathy to the United States or its interests. It led the US to argue the virtues of democracy while simultaneously propping up right-wing dictatorships from Chile to the Philippines.

In the name of fighting Communism, the US entered a series of largely fruitless wars against nationalist movements that peaked in the debacle of Vietnam, and tailed off into Ronald Reagan's military adventures in Central America. The paradox in Cuba was that US policy created almost exactly what it aimed to destroy—an unremittingly hostile, pro-Soviet and spectacularly long-lived regime, built around the personality of Fidel. Every tightening of the screw on Cuba, every failed assassination plot or invasion attempt burnished Fidel's credentials as a heroic David against a reactionary and bullying Goliath.