

subsidy. Gorbachev has made it clear that he wants Fidel to get with some *perestroika* and pull more economic weight. Fidel has replied, essentially, "take your *perestroika* and stuff it." In a December speech, Fidel pointedly stated that Cuba's errors originated "in the imitation of experiments of other socialist countries ... which now tell us these are no good. But we would not like them to tell us the same in twenty years."

The Soviets take this with great dignity. One look at the Soviet embassy in Havana tells you these folks are here to stay, regardless of insults from their host. The embassy is a huge white affair dominated by a tower with turrets and projections that scream electronics. The lobby is a cavern of dark green Cuban marble, furnished only with a bust of Lenin on a ten-foot pedestal. The first secretary, Gennadi Sizov, emerged from a heavy wooden door near Lenin and greeted me in affable Spanish. "We appreciate that Cuba has its own special problems and needs its own special solutions," he said, "and the Soviet Union will always support its friend and ally."

So that was the official line. But most seasoned observers believe Gorbachev is putting the screws on behind the scenes, trying to persuade Castro that economic failure is by far a greater threat in the long run than a few democratic adjustments. No one is sure, however, that he would not go further and use economic threats.

CUBA IS STILL THE *BÊTE NOIRE*, OR RATHER *ROUGE*, OF WASHINGTON. The ferocity of the US government's hostility is truly amazing, more even than I encountered in briefings on Iran at the State Department during the hostage crisis. When he was Secretary of State, George Shultz said there was no chance for normal relations in the foreseeable future, and that Fidel had "to cease acting against the US in this hemisphere." No one expects the Bush administration policy to be any different.

For Washington, the recent Angola agreement on the pullout of Cuban troops is not the "warming trend" hailed by so many. What matters is closer to home: Nicaragua, El Salvador and US-Cuban immigration talks. Washington also takes an extremely serious view of human rights in Cuba. Unfortunately, the recent State Department report on the subject is so exaggerated as to be, as one writer put it, "hallucinatory." This again gives Che's North American faithful an excuse to continue to ignore very real repression: the muzzling, arrest and exile of genuine human rights leaders and the people they defend – people like Ricardo Bofill and Elisardo Sanchez, and the Arcos brothers, of the two main Cuban human rights committees. These organizations are not "legal" but they are harassed rather than closed. Bofill and Sanchez have fled.

"Bofill is a liar and a fraud, just looking for power," Minister of Culture Armando Hart hissed at me when I interviewed him. "Valladares is a Batista criminal," he added, referring to the former prisoner now heading the US delegation to the UN Committee on Human Rights in Geneva. There are genuine questions about Valladares' credentials. But thus is *all* opposition dismissed and discredited. Cuba had released almost four-hundred political prisoners by last summer, concurrent with unprecedented visits by Amnesty International, and other non-government human rights groups. But after they departed, arrests began again.

As I left one night to visit Dr. Samuel Martinez Lara, a psychiatrist who started the Party for Human Rights, a friend warned me not to go. The people the doctor was staying with, fellow human rights activists, had just been arrested: Tania Diaz Castro and her son Guillermo Vladimir Rivas, were sentenced overnight to a year each, allegedly for attacking police at a prison when they went to visit her husband, a prisoner for over twenty years. Subsequently, the husband and son were released after a visit from some US Congressmen.

Americas Watch, a US Human Rights group, says that their impression is that "the Cubans are concerned about their human rights image and are making significant concessions to the international community, but all the same laws are in place. There are no guarantees of freedom of expression and all the repressive machinery remains."

Nothing here is not political," asserted the Minister of Education José Fernandez Alvarez, the military hero who routed the Bay of Pigs invasion. "We are ninety miles from the USA." The American bogeyman is highly useful – all repression is ultimately justified by "Ninety miles ..." "The US boycott and isolation is a useful game for both sides," said Jorge Walls when I talked to him in Miami. "It leaves pro or anti-Castro as the only choices." Many American analysts, including Wayne Smith, formerly chief of the US interest section in Havana, argue that ultimately this works against US interests, fortifying Castro, creating a false "emergency" he can use at will. They see Canada's policy as sane, pragmatic and practical; pursuing cordial relations and as much trade as possible, (especially since the US has left a vacuum) and pressuring for human rights behind closed doors.

In a Havana hotel bar, I met an Ontario government trade delegation in town to push everything from apples to greenhouses. Another was looking after a long-term project involving Canadian Holstein cattle. Canadian ambassador in Havana, Michael Kergin believes the Cubans care about what we think regarding Canada as a "barometer" of how far they can go. But he admits they have studiously ignored us on many human rights cases for years. And Canada does not apply any serious pressure or threats, only diplomatic noises.

Lee Lockwood, who knew Fidel well, has speculated that Castro's harsh treatment of his opponents is rooted in a kind of guilt at coming from the bourgeoisie himself, and in the fact that for all that he likes to claim his was an ideal peasant revolution, it owed its success to the liberal middle class fed up with Batista. Most of the *plantados* were of this group; the revolution, as usual, devoured its own. Fidel clings to an old and puritanical interpretation of Marx, the way he cultivates his image as just another peasant. But everyone I met says Fidel, at least, believes in it all. Fidel is not in it for power, as are some of the vindictive men around him. There is much of the macho swaggerer about him, the preemptory political road hog. But he believes in his mission for his people.

I'm tempted to compare him with other revolutionary leaders from Robespierre to Khomeini to Mao – all genuine believers who sacrificed many of those they claimed to be saving in relentless pursuit of their Grail. But it is worth saying that if monarchs of the past left palaces and cathedrals and legal codes, and Batista left casinos and prisons, Fidel Castro will leave schools and hospitals and his own prisons full of ghosts. □

