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Myopia and Missed Opportunities

Most studies on the dynamic of contemporary U.S.-Cuban relations tend to fix their sights on Washington, D.C. Depending upon the ideological proclivities of the authors, the analysis will tend either to rationalize the legitimacy and utility of U.S. policy towards Cuba or to consider U.S. policy towards the Caribbean island to be outmoded, ineffective, and even counter-productive to overall U.S. foreign-policy goals. But in either case, the focus is squarely on the United States. Morris Morley and Chris McGillion’s study of the U.S.-Cuban dynamic in the post-Cold War period (1989-2001), which tends to adhere to the latter critical assessment of U.S. Cuba policy, is no exception to this Washington-centric trend; and herein lies a missed opportunity for the authors to offer a different perspective on the subject to those generally familiar with the basic contours of the relationship. Even though the basic storyline and conclusions are not unique or unexpected, the book is redeemed by the thoroughness with which the authors meticulously construct the policy debates and the shifting alliances in Washington that reflected the new global realities of a post-Cold War world and its impact on a bilateral relationship traditionally driven by a Cold War logic.

The book is composed of a brief introduction, which outlines the goals and purpose of the study, and is followed by four somewhat lengthy chapters. The first chapter evaluates U.S. Cuba policy during the Bush administration of 1989-1993, while the subsequent three chapters look at the Cuba policy of the successive Clinton administrations in the context of the critical 1994 Republican takeover of the federal Congress. The book ends with a brief conclusion and a postscript which gives a surprisingly nuanced and up-to-date picture of current U.S. President George W. Bush’s Cuba policy.

>From the beginning, Morley and McGillion leave no doubt as to their interpretation of the nature of the United States’s post-Cold War Cuba policy: “The central argument of this study is that although the rationale for a hostile posture no longer existed at the beginning of 1989, Washington’s policy toward Havana remained consistent in the transition from the ‘Old World Order’ to the ‘New World Order.’ Bush and Clinton policy operated within the same Cold War conceptual framework that shaped the policies of their predecessors: heightened economic warfare and a refusal to consider normalized ties in the absence of a regime change” (p. 5). Not surprisingly, the authors contend that the continuation of this misguided U.S. Cuba policy is shaped by the familiar arguments of domestic political constraints in the United States, an aggressive hardline Cuban exile lobby, the unwillingness of U.S. presidential administrations to consider a shift in policy direction that would result in only minimal gains at the risk of significant costs, and the manipulation of U.S. sensitivities by the Castro regime.

The myopia of U.S. policymakers regarding Cuba was the assumption that the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the socialist bloc dealt the death blow to Cas-
tro, and that tightening the screws of the embargo would simply hasten Castro’s demise, putting an end to this last little bit of “unfinished business.” However, Morley and McGillion clearly demonstrate that U.S. policymakers not only misread the situation, but were increasingly out of touch even with mainstream thinking in the United States, which came to understand the pragmatism of a different, more engaged policy towards Cuba.

The clear depiction of the disjuncture between the U.S. policy establishment and public opinion regarding Cuba is perhaps the book’s highlight. The contrast made in the book between the hardening of official U.S. policy towards Cuba from 1989 to the present, and the corresponding softening of U.S. public attitudes and behavior towards Cuba is stark and illuminating. For instance, the locus of U.S. Cuba policy during this time shifted increasingly from the more pragmatic and flexible foreign policy agencies of the executive branch of government to a small, but powerful, cadre of rigid hardliners in the U.S. federal legislature. The first Bush administration hesitated initially to embrace the more hardline Cuban Democracy Act (CDA), a legislative initiative sponsored by Democratic Congressman Robert Torricelli of New Jersey. However, the CDA ultimately won the support not only of Bush, but also of presidential candidate Bill Clinton, who promptly signed the CDA into law soon after taking office. From there, the CDA was followed by the even more stringent measures of the Helms-Burton legislation.

During this same time period, as Morley and McGillion note, U.S. business—particularly agricultural and pharmaceutical interests—stepped up its lobbying campaign in Washington to ease embargo restrictions on the sale of foods and medicines to the island. Cultural contacts between Cuba and the United States increased dramatically, ranging from a growth in academic exchange programs between the two countries to the initiation of “baseball diplomacy” which brought the Baltimore Orioles to Cuba. The resolution of the Eli=n Gonzlez controversy and public support of the Clinton administration’s handling of this crisis gave further evidence of this distancing between a more flexible and open public attitude towards Cuba and the increasingly inflexible and hardline official policy. Most surprisingly, even the Cuban American National Foundation (CANF)—historically the most disciplined, single-minded, and powerful anti-Castro/pro-embargo lobby—seemed to reflect this changing environment as it began to experience some internal leadership struggles over the intensity and direction of its Cuba policy positions and its lobbying efforts.

Another point of clarity for which this book deserves attention is its contextualization of the global reaction to the CDA and the Helms-Burton legislation particularly—both extensions to the U.S. embargo of Cuba. It is common knowledge to those familiar with external reaction to U.S. Cuba policy that most of the world sees the U.S. embargo against Cuba as an anachronism and a failed policy. What is of particular interest in this book is the description of foreign reaction to the extra-territorial dimension of these policies and the creative diplomacy employed by foreign countries to counteract perceived U.S. overreach. The European Union’s use of the WTO’s dispute resolution procedures to pose a challenge to the legality of the Helms-Burton legislation under WTO rules, coupled with the threat by some countries to impose retaliatory sanctions unilaterally on U.S.-based business operations under its own jurisdiction, successfully pressured U.S. authorities in the executive branch to find creative ways around implementing certain parts of the legislation.

In this way, Morley and McGillion successfully demonstrate the coalescing of multiple forces, both international and domestic, against the grain of the official U.S. Cuba policy in the post Cold War period. Morley and McGillion reasonably contend that these larger trends created a number of opportunities for the U.S. political establishment to break out of its stagnant Cold War posture towards Cuba. But because of an inability (or an unwillingness) to expend the energy to move beyond the old parameters of this unfinished Cold War business, the United States failed to capitalize on these opportunities.

This book by Morley and McGillion does present a thorough, detailed picture of the “unfinished business” of the U.S.-Cuban relationship from the perspective of Washington legislators and policy-makers—and for this it is a worthwhile and recommended read. It is what Morley and McGillion set out to do, and it is done well for the most part. But the business of interpreting U.S.-Cuban relations in the post-Cold War environment can never really be finished until the other sides of the story are studied with equal critical attention, detail, analysis, and evaluation.