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Castro's Challenge to Reagan

He says the U.S. 'holy war' in Central America makes dialogue impossible.

It has been a difficult year for Fidel Castro. After Grenada was pried out of Cuba's orbit, he admitted that he could not guarantee the future of revolutionaries in Nicaragua, or anywhere else. But he remains the most durable of political leaders. He has seen rivals from Dwight D. Eisenhower to Jimmy Carter come and go. And on the eve of the 25th anniversary of Cuba's revolution this week, he offered NEWSWEEK'S United Nations Bureau Chief Patricia J. Sethi an exclusive glimpse of his contest with the latest Yankee in the White House. Excerpts:

SETHI: Will relations between Cuba and the United States ever move to a more normal plane?

CASTRO: Present relations between Cuba and the United States are so irrational, so absurd, that I feel obliged to have a certain "historical" confidence that they have to move toward a more normal plane. [But] the time has come for U.S. rulers to understand that the Latin America they regarded for long decades as their "natural backyard"—where they imposed and overthrew governments, where they gave orders and where U.S. ambassadors made decisions that should have been made by the presidents of the republics—no longer exists.

In the coming years, and possibly before the year 2000, Cuba will not be the only Latin American country to have chosen socialism as a system of government, even [though others] may not follow the erroneously called "Cuban Model"—which in no way do we intend to universalize. There will also be nonsocialist governments determined to prevent the transnationals' economic domination.

My rejection of the U.S. imperialist structure—a rejection that is shared today by dozens of millions in Latin America—poses very little threat to the capitalist system in the United States. I would like that capitalist system to disappear and be replaced by a more rational and humane system, but I can assure the U.S. people that I have no intention of encouraging a socialist revolution—which I still consider very distant—in the United States and which, when its time comes, will have to be led by men and women from the working class and people of the United States.

Q. Is any form of dialogue with the Reagan administration out of the question?

A. An ideological or philosophical reconciliation between the present U.S. administration and ourselves—and even possible alternatives to that administration in the next few years—is out of the question. But

the Reagan administration. There were talks between Secretary of State Alexander Haig and Vice President Carlos Rafael Rodríguez. Later on, Gen. Vernon Walters visited Havana and I myself held long talks with him. But we cannot say that a dialogue was established; it was rather a confrontation of viewpoints. There is no hope for dialogue as long as Mr. Reagan keeps on thinking that what is happening in Central America is the result of malevolent orchestrations by the Soviet Union and Cuba. He fails to realize that these social upheavals have been present in Central America for 50 years—at a time when the Soviet revolution was fighting to survive and the Cuban revolution did not even exist.

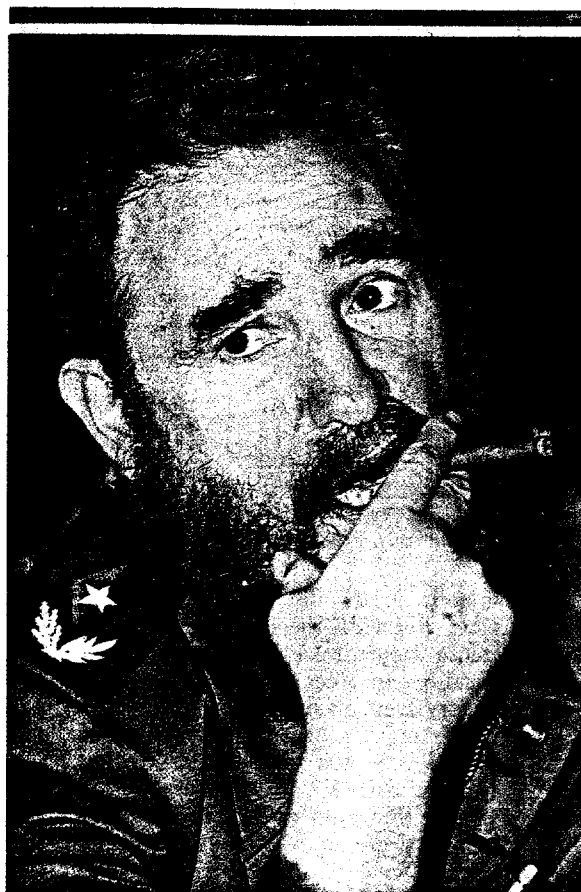
Q. President Reagan argues that it is your goal to export revolution throughout the hemisphere.

A. I do not believe that revolution is an exportable item. I am not hiding that revolutionary Cuba has offered its active solidarity to other Latin American revolutionaries in countries where, as in the case of Somoza's Nicaragua, all democratic action and all possibility of protest other than armed struggle was ruled out by brutal terror. Nor am I hiding the fact that when a large group of Latin American countries, under the inspiration and guidance of Washington, not only tried to isolate Cuba politically, but economically blockaded it and helped sponsor sabotage, armed infiltrations, assassination attempts, we responded by helping all those who wanted to fight such governments.

We were not the ones to start subversion, it was they. Actually, we can neither export revolution nor can the United States prevent it. Reagan is cunningly using this argument to frighten the U.S. people, by fanning a primitive anticommunism. These arguments enable Reagan to conduct a policy of overt intervention such as the one brutally carried out against

Grenada, a tiny island with a population of 100,000 people.

Q. What exactly was going on in Grenada? The Reagan administration released what it called a "warm bag of evidence" to suggest that Cuba was (a) training and organizing armed forces in Grenada,



Larry Downing—NEWSWEEK

Cuba's durable leader: A quarter century of revolution

'The U.S. is not interested in a solution [in Central America]. It is interested in a policy of intervention and force.'

the fact that we in Cuba keep on being socialists, and that the United States will keep on being the most important center of world capitalism, should not mean that there might not be major areas in which both countries and governments could work constructively.

We have never rejected a dialogue with

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(b) building up ground-based communications networks linked with the Soviet Sputnik Satellite System, (c) constructing a large airport capable of receiving Soviet-made transport aircraft, (d) storing large quantities of Soviet-made arms and equipment for Cuban use, (e) placing in position an air-defense system designed to protect Grenada against precisely the operation that the United States undertook last October.

A. The events in Grenada showed that [Grenadian] forces were totally proportionate to the size of a small island constantly threatened with invasion from Miami by counterrevolutionary elements protected by the CIA. The United States had also insinuated that it could use other countries in the Caribbean for the invasion. Regarding the airport, after the invasion it was proved that the Grenadians had wanted to build it long before the Bishop government. As for the argument that Bishop was storing "Soviet-made weapons for Cuban use," we have our weapons here for the purpose of defending our country against a possible invasion. It would be absurd to deposit 3,000 or 4,000 automatic weapons for us in Grenada. It is true that we had set out to assist the Grenadians in establishing a communications base, but everybody knows that there are numerous similar communications bases in the Caribbean and Latin America.

Before the Grenada invasion we had lost a very dear and valuable friend with the death of Bishop. With it the revolutionary process was virtually liquidated. The United States, in invading the island, killed a corpse and perpetrated a monstrous crime against the sovereignty and the desires for liberty and progress of the peoples of the Caribbean and Latin America. In invading Grenada, [President Reagan] showed Latin America that he did not respect nonintervention and that he was determined to continue using the "big stick" of old times.

Our position regarding the new government [on Grenada] was well known. Relations between us and the [Bernard] Coard group were very bad. Most likely, we would have finished building the airport and withdrawn from the country. Maybe we would have kept doctors there as a humanitarian gesture. But we would have reduced our cooperation. Our assessment was that the Coard group could not sustain itself after they killed Bishop. The revolution had committed suicide.

But that did not justify the intervention. American citizens ran no risk. The extremist group visited them and gave them guarantees, and we knew they were in no danger. We even informed the U.S. government to that effect 72 hours before the invasion. The entire theory through which Reagan tried to justify the invasion is false. It is a total lie from head to toe. It was a cheap political, opportunistic operation to take advantage of the tragedy within the country.

There were other factors, too. Reagan recalled the fate of the hostages in Iran. The American people were humiliated by that

experience. There were the deaths of the 241 U.S. Marines in Lebanon the weekend before. There was the defeat in Vietnam. Reagan exploited all these to present the invasion of Grenada to the American people as a great victory. That's dangerous. That's an irresponsible policy that can lead to war and to new adventurist activity in El Salvador and Nicaragua and Cuba.

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