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Senators Soften Cuba Resolution

The surprising deletion by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee of key phrases in reaffirming the anti-Cuba resolution passed in 1962 shows how far that key committee has watered down its will and determination despite Fidel Castro's recent inroads into Central America.

The new edition of the 1962 resolution pulls teeth out of the version pushed by President Kennedy, which passed with only one dissenting vote during the Cuban missile crisis. Deleted were the words "including the use of arms" in the resolution's pledge to resist Cuban subversion or aggression.

Conservative anger at the committee's surgery points the Senate to a showdown vote on the Kennedy-era resolution versus the watered-down edition. The White House is moving quietly to make sure the 1962 language gets strong Senate approval on grounds that passage of the committee's text would signal U.S. weakness.

A private letter from William P. Clark, President Reagan's National Security Council assistant, to Sen. Steve Symms, the 1982 sponsor of the 1962 resolution, shows intense presidential interest. Clark wrote Symms April 29 that he "enthusiastically" endorsed Symms' resolution "as an abiding expression of the Reagan administration's policy toward Cuba."

Similar support has come from Defense undersecretary Fred Iklé, who wrote Symms in late April that his resolution is "important to U.S. policy," and from the State Department. Pentagon lobbying teams have been deployed to help push the 1962 version; Sen. John Tower, chairman of the Armed Services Committee, may tack the amendment to the defense authorization bill now before the Senate.

In the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, a different opinion rules. Voting down the Symms-1962 text, the committee, under Sen. Charles H. Percy, punched one hole after another in the 1962 language, giving the resolution the appearance of a leaky umbrella. It promises U.S. action not against an "offensive military threat" but only against one that is "serious."

Equally eye-catching was the committee's curious decision to overrule its own staff and rewrite a section of a companion resolution pledging U.S. support for negotiations in El Salvador. The staff's draft promised U.S. efforts "to reduce the flow of arms into El Salvador."

The committee found those words objectionable and deleted them. The reason: they might be used by the CIA—or by anti-communist Latin states—as an invitation for covert operations against Cuban-Nicaraguan guerrilla-running.

Indeed, concern over the taint of what Sen. Paul Tsongas called "anti-Castro jingoism" clearly affected both him and other liberal Democrats, including Sens. Claiborne Pell and Christopher Dodd. Tsongas told us: "There's a kind of 'the Russians are coming, the Russians are coming' shrillness in Symms' rhetoric." That ostensibly led the liberals both to tone down the 1962 Cuba resolution and weaken the mildly tough talk in the one dealing with El Salvador.

But it is questionable whether so tortured an explanation will suffice in this election year. At the height of former president Carter's strenuous effort to entice Castro out of the Soviet orbit and into the inter-American system, such a dilution of the Cuban resolution might have been politically palatable.

The downward trend since then has

hardened suspicions of most American voters about Castro's Cuba. Even apologists for Nicaragua's Sandinista regime now agree it is under the control of Marxists greatly influenced if not totally directed by Moscow and Havana. The Cuban-Nicaraguan effort to unseat El Salvador's anti-communist regime by supporting the pro-Marxist insurgency has been the principal focus of Reagan administration Caribbean policy since the beginning.

Given those circumstances, senators in the Symms camp confidently claim that the 1962 version of the anti-Cuba resolution will be approved by the Senate over the committee's draft. Administration officials agree, but they want no cliffhanger decision that will dangerously inflate doubts about U.S. will and determination as exhibited in the Foreign Relations Committee.

That was the subtle point of a letter from a State Department official backing Symms' resolution. Its impact on Cuba and "the unacceptability of Cuban behavior," wrote Deputy Assistant Secretary Stephen Bosworth, would directly depend on the strength it showed in Congress.

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