ARTICLE APPEARED ON PAGE I Part IV

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Next, It's 'Radio Wars' as U.S., Cuba Power Up

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The inauguration of Radio Marti this month will be an act of political confrontation that will raise the already-high level of tension in the Caribbean Basin and make peaceful resolution of regional problems more difficult.

Radio Marti is the Reagan Administration's new propaganda station beamed at Cuba and named for 19th-Century Cuban patriot Jose Marti. Born out of long-standing tensions, the station has become a major catalyst in the deterioration of relations between two countries even before it goes on the air.

The United States has broadcast propaganda to Cuba for more than two decades, beginning in 1961 with Radio Swan, the clandestine CIA station that attempted "to soften up the Cubans' will to resist" before the Bay of Pigs invasion. The new phase of U.S. broadcasting to Cuba was recommended by the "Santa Fe Committee," a group of conservative scholars and security analysts who formulated a Latin American policy for the incoming Reagan Administration in 1980. Their report suggested that a new station be established to hold the Cuban government to "account for its policies of aggression." The group added: "If propaganda fails, a war of national liberation against Castro must be launched."

In 1981 President Reagan proposed legislation to create Radio Marti. His initiative won praise from Cuban exile groups and other conservative organizations but ran into congressional opposition. Many lawmakers questioned whether broadcasting was sound foreign policy and effective use of tax dollars during times of astronomical budget deficits.

After prolonged debate, a compromise placing Radio Marti under the supervision of the U.S. Information Agency passed Congress in 1983, and preparations began for its likely debut this month—perhaps in the next few days.

Cuban President Fidel Castro has angrily promised to retaliate, describing himself as a boxer waiting to climb in the ring to fight the "subversive station." His threats are loud: Cuba has constructed two "monster stations" with 500 kilowatts of power—10 times more powerful than the largest commercial radio stations in the United States.

A Cuban response to the United States with these transmitters "would wreak interference havoc from New York to California," according to a technical study by the National Association of Broadcasters. NAB engineers estimate that scores—perhaps hundreds—of commercial AM stations in the United States would lose large parts of their nighttime coverage in the event of massive Cuban airspace invasion.

In response to Castro's threats, Kenneth R. Giddens, acting director of Radio Marti, said that Cuban disruption of U.S. broadcasting would be "an act of war." Giddens recently added: "Maybe that's the time to blow up a few of Castro's transmitters." Another senior Administration official reportedly told worried U.S. broadcasters that Cuban interference would be legal justification for "surgically removing" the offending Cuban transmitters. The Cubans apparently have taken the bellicose comments seriously. A once-secret U.S. State Department cable, released under the Freedom of Information Act to Washington attorney Kenneth D. Salomon, reported that CIA satellite photography revealed an anti-aircraft emplacement next to one of the large Cuban transmitters.

"Propaganda helps to cause war," wrote John B. Whitton and Arthur Larson in "Propaganda: Towards Disarmament in the War of Words." Both were distinguished professors of international law, and Larson was director of the U.S. Information Agency during the Eisenhower Administration. They cite numerous examples of propaganda as a prelude and, in their view, a contributor to avoidable armed conflict.

While it seems unlikely that the current Cuban-U.S. radio war will escalate into a real war, the interaction between hostile rhetoric and hostile actions is evident.

The CIA's Radio Swan and its successor after the Bay of Pigs debacle, Radio Americas, instructed Cubans to sabotage crops and public utilities and to rise against Castro. Cuba responded in 1961 by founding Radio Havana, which broadcast virulent propaganda encouraging the overthrow of the U.S. government and its Latin American allies. From 1962 to 1966, Radio Havana broadcast "Radio Free Dixie," a program urging United States blacks to burn their cities and commit a variety of other violent, subversive acts.

Following the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, Voice of America (the U.S. government international broadcasting service) directed specially designed programming to Cuba from a new transmitter in the Florida Keys. Although the VOA's campaign was more restrained in tone than its predecessors, one analyst described it as the most concentrated propaganda blitz in the history of the hemisphere.

Despite considerable chest-beating on both sides, none of these broadcasts had significant audiences or demonstrable benefits. Both Radio Free Dixie and Radio Swan were notable failures; their only effects were to further polarize Cuba and the United States.

Why then is the United States intent on continuing the radio war? Cuban officials interviewed in Havana claim that Radio Marti is only a part of a larger plan to provoke a confrontation that Cuba can ill afford. Despite their fears, the Cubans say this is a matter of honor, and they will retaliate regardless of costs.

U.S. officials, on the other hand, argue that Cuban threats should not influence U.S. foreign policy. One Administration official said Radio Marti represents "an international game of chicken and the United States will not blink."

If Cuba and the United States reached this flash point through radio, a reciprocal, step-by-step de-escalation of the broadcast propaganda problem is also possible. Tuning down the radio wars, in turn, could contribute to a de-escalation of the real wars in the Caribbean Basin. The first signal could be a timely turnoff for Radio Marti.

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