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Book Review

THE CLOSEST OF ENEMIES

*A Personal and Diplomatic Account of
U. S.-Cuban Relations Since 1957.*

By Wayne S. Smith.

*Illustrated. 308 pp. New York:
W. W. Norton & Company. \$19.95.*

By Jorge G. Castaneda

LATIN AMERICAN diplomats, statesmen and intellectuals have often believed that there is more than meets the eye to the unending estrangement between Cuba and the United States. Beyond the specific explanations for each chapter in that divorce's turbulent history, they stress a deeper meaning. In the last analysis, according to this view, the United States, through seven Presidents in 28 years, has made Cuba an example of the cost of revolution in Latin America: a complete and indefinite cutoff of all political, economic and cultural links with Washington. United States administrations may not always impede revolution or radical social change in Latin America, though they often can — as they did in Guatemala in 1954, the Dominican Republic in 1965 and Chile in 1970-73, and as they have been doing in El Salvador since 1979 — but they can make the costs seem unbearable to others who may have revolution on their minds.

Wayne S. Smith's memoir of relations between the United States and Cuba since 1957, two years before the Cuban revolution, does not espouse this view, which is what one would expect from a former State Department career officer, regardless of his clearly perceived sympathies for Latin American ways and customs. Nor does this readable, meticulous and well-reasoned account of endlessly missed opportunities for normalization of relations between Fidel Castro and the United States attempt to provide a substantive, all-encompassing explanation for more than a quarter-century of conflict and tensions. The quasi-psychological motivations Mr. Smith resorts to are no substitute — and do not pretend to be — for an abstract analysis of why the world's wealthiest and most powerful nation has not been able to accept and deal with such an obviously permanent fixture of Latin American and international life. The search for the underlying causes of this Caribbean paradox falls outside the scope of "The Closest of Enemies," but the author's narrative, particularly of the Carter Administration and its fleeting détente with Fidel Castro, sheds fascinating light on many episodes that illustrate that paradox. It also lends credence — Mr. Smith's intention notwithstanding — to the Latin American perspective described above.

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During the Carter Administration, the author was in charge of the Cuban desk at the State Department; from 1979 to 1982, he headed the United States Interest Section in Havana. He was thus familiar — sometimes intimately, sometimes less so — with the entire process of rapprochement followed by renewed distance that took place at the time. He attributes the failure of the step-by-step, reciprocal process above all to the reluctance of the National Security Council — and its chief, Zbigniew Brzezinski — to pursue normalization of ties with Cuba, and to the unwillingness of the State Department and President Carter to force the issue. Mr. Smith relies heavily on former Secretary of State Cyrus

Vance, whose memoirs and positions buttress his arguments. He makes his case well. There is some question whether the whole N.S.C. was as opposed to any form of agreement with Cuba — beyond the opening of Interest Sections and the easing of travel restrictions — as he implies, but his examples are nonetheless persuasive.

In November of 1977, after the two Interest Sections had opened, President Carter issued a statement to the effect that increases in the number of Cuban troops in Angola would complicate further progress in talks between Cuba and the United States. According to Mr. Smith, Mr. Brzezinski then told a group of journal-

ists, on background, that "a new CIA study . . . revealed that there had been a steady military buildup in Angola and Ethiopia during the summer and fall. . . Normalization with Cuba was therefore now 'impossible.'" But Mr. Smith states in no uncertain terms that "there had been no buildup" (author's emphasis) and that the C.I.A. had simply "revised upward its estimate of how many Cuban troops were in Angola." Mr. Smith does not explicitly accuse Mr. Brzezinski of bad faith, but he hardly needs to.

Similarly, Mr. Smith points out that the Carter Administration's claim that Cuba bears responsibility for the freeze in the normalization process in 1978 because it dispatched troops to Ethiopia is not entirely solid. The former diplomat explains in some detail the circumstances under which the Cubans arrived in Ethiopia; he argues that Somalia's switch of alliances in 1977 and subsequent invasion of its Ethiopian neighbor — by then a Cuban ally and ideological soulmate — were both perceived as having been orchestrated from Washington. As Mr. Smith puts it: "The Soviets and Cubans, of course, thought that the U.S. was behind the Somali invasion. . . I did not believe there were any such sinister motives behind U.S. actions . . . At the same time, I had to acknowledge to myself that had I been sitting in Castro's chair, I would have been just as convinced as he of Washington's ulterior motives." Once again, Mr. Brzezinski's role — as well as Mr. Vance's passive acquiescence and Mr. Carter's waffling — are not too discreetly suggested. Although Mr. Smith may be right or wrong on each detail of the specific examples he provides, it stands to reason that Mr. Brzezinski did place United States-Cuban normalization in the context of United States-Soviet tensions. Likewise, it is probable that he did subordinate the United States-Cuban rapprochement to the need to deter Soviet aggression in the third world by showing firmness. All of which may have made geopolitical sense, but it also meant that any understanding between Cuba and the United States was virtually impossible: Fidel Castro refused to renounce his Soviet alliance and his friends in Africa and Central America for the dubious delights and uncertain stability of potential and conditional normalization with the United States — and will continue to do so.

The high point of Mr. Smith's personal history is his

narrative of the Mariel affair. In April 1980, more than 100,000 Cubans fled to Miami in hundreds of small boats. Many left for political reasons; others were expelled from Cuba when Mr. Castro sent thousands of delinquents and criminals from the jails and streets of Havana to the United States, handing Mr. Carter one more problem with no solution. Mr. Smith lived through the crisis *in situ*, and offers explanations for why it occurred in the first place, and why the Cuban leader lost control of a situation for the first time since the revolution.

As of late 1979, Cuban citizens wishing to leave their country had been hijacking boats and sailing them to Florida. Instead of trying the hijackers and jailing them — as Cuba had done with American hijackers of planes to Cuba — the United States Government set them free. Mr. Smith emphasizes that the Cubans registered several protests, through the Interest Section, and never received a reply, much less satisfaction. According to Mr. Smith, the issue was juggled back and forth by the State Department and the Justice Department — the responsible agency — but nothing was ever done. At the same time, the United States was refusing to grant visas to Cubans who wanted to leave legally. This apparent American hypocrisy eventually led Mr. Castro — distraught and overwhelmed, according to Mr. Smith, by the death of Celia Sanchez, his companion of 25 years — to order the Mariel sealift. It also made him underestimate the number of Cubans who wanted to leave, as well as the political consequences for Mr. Carter's re-election campaign of another instance of his perceived indecisiveness.

MR. SMITH'S version of these and other events in the Cuban-American conflict since 1959 will undoubtedly be disputed. His book's greater interest lies in the vision it gives of the historical process, and its similarities to the present situation in Nicaragua. During the first several years of the Cuban revolution, the United States dealt with the Castro regime as if it were a transitory phenomenon, which would either be done away with — by others, at no cost to the United States — or would go away on its own. Later, when it became clear that neither would occur, the United States attempted to achieve an understanding with Cuba, but on its own terms, essentially demanding that Fidel Castro cease to be Fidel Castro in exchange for normalization. When that failed also, the Reagan Administration simply put the Cuban issue aside.

In the Nicaraguan drama, the United States still finds itself in the first stage: attempting to overthrow the Sandinistas by remote control, or hoping they will just disappear. Once again, neither will happen: the battle between the Sandinistas and the rebels, or *contras*, is over, lost by President Reagan's "freedom fighters" in the halls of Congress and the jungles of Nicaragua. The Sandinistas are more firmly in power today, and more relaxed and adroit in its exercise, than at any time since 1979, and they know it.

In the last analysis, if President Daniel Ortega Saavedra of Nicaragua outlasts Ronald Reagan — as Fidel Castro has outlasted every American President since Eisenhower — the United States will have to negotiate with the Sandinistas from a position of weakness. Because of President Reagan's obsession with getting rid of his Sandinista nemesis, and given his failure so far to attain this goal, the United States will have lost its proxy war, and Nicaragua will have won. The fact that viewing the problem in these terms makes little sense is irrelevant: this is the way the Reagan Administration has framed the debate. Like Cuba, the Sandinistas will have defied the United States and gotten away with it. The cost they both paid has been dear and may deter some in Latin America from following the road of revolution. But for many others, the taste of victory over the "colossus of the north" seems priceless. In any case, those who pay it are not disposed to give up at the negotiating table what they won in the mountains, the news media and the international arena. This is the lesson we can draw from Wayne Smith's account, and from the United States' failure to come to terms with revolution in Cuba, Nicaragua and elsewhere in the hemisphere. □

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