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**A conversation with Lars Schoultz**

Author of *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic: The United States and the Cuban Revolution*

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**Q: What's the problem with Cuba?**

**A:** The book's title, taken from one of Theodore Roosevelt's letters in 1907, captures perfectly the exasperation of U.S. officials since our first encounters in the early 1820s, when Havana-based pirates were plundering U.S. shipping.

But while Cuba has always been a pain in the neck, Fidel Castro's revolutionary generation—the focus of my book—has been especially annoying. It has sent us wave after wave of refugees. It has also supported governments and political movements we oppose in Latin America and Africa and even the Middle East, as if we didn't have enough problems there already. And most galling, it has refused to accept the position of inferiority to which we have traditionally assigned the peoples of the Caribbean. The Cuban revolution is a challenge to U.S. hegemony, and as one White House official commented in the late 1960s, "that especially bugs us."

**Q: Why did you choose to write this book?**

**A:** I've been studying U.S. policy toward Latin America for almost four decades, and during that period Cuba has been our principal enduring problem. The United States has not simply declined to have normal diplomatic and economic relations with Havana for half a century; it has also spent most of the past five decades openly and actively trying to overthrow the island's government. It has not been successful, and I never understood why.

After ten years of work, I think I get it. I want this book to stand as my generation's explanation of a policy that will seem strange to those who come after us. I hope it will serve as the baseline for future generations to make corrections (few, I hope) and additions (many, I'm sure).

**Q: Who should read this book?**

**A:** This book is for anyone interested in understanding why the United States doggedly pursued one of the most unproductive policies in the history of U.S. foreign relations. We've tried everything to get rid of Fidel Castro and his hearty band of bearded rebels—from a CIA assassination plot featuring a ballpoint pen rigged with a hypodermic needle so fine that Fidel Castro would not notice he was being injected with poison (that was in 1963) to a U.S. interests section in Havana with a Times Square-style streaming electronic ticker running across its facade, the only such device in diplomatic history, or anyone's history. The State Department uses it to acquaint Cubans with the wisdom of representative U.S. thinkers such as the late rocker

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## **2-2-2 That Infernal Little Cuban Republic**

Frank Zappa: “Communism doesn’t work because people like to own stuff” (that was in 2006).

Why do we spend our tax dollars on these activities? My answer is that U.S. policy is based upon an ideology of benevolent domination. We believe Cubans need our help, but they just don’t realize it. So we have to twist their arm a bit, but only for their own good.

### **Q: Why is the U.S.-Cuban relationship important?**

**A:** In itself, Cuba is unimportant, especially since the Cold War ended. But the U.S.-Cuban relationship is the best-ever illustration of why it is no longer easy to be a hegemonic power, to take up the White Man’s Burden. The behavior of great powers is constrained in the contemporary world.

At a rudimentary level, this book is simply a case study in the trials and tribulations of realism, an intellectual tradition stretching back to the fifth century B.C., when Thucydides, chronicling the conflicts among Greek city-states, perfectly captured realism’s bedrock principle: the strong will do what they want, and the weak will accept what they must.

Washington policy makers pride themselves in being realists, and Cuba, Thucydides would emphasize, is a modest island with an economy 1/250th the size of its wealthy, continent-wide neighbor, which has used a substantial portion of its fabulous wealth to create the most powerful military in the history of the human race. And that raw strength has given U.S. officials, such as Secretary of State Alexander Haig the ability to ask President Reagan for a simple green light: “You just give me the word and I’ll turn that f – – island into a parking lot.”

What Thucydides would have difficulty explaining is why, when the Cubans refused to accept what they must, their island was not turned into a parking lot. How have they managed to get away with it?

This book accents the constraints that the modern world now imposes upon the exercise of power. It especially highlights the most elemental constraint, the need to maintain a sense of proportion, and emphasizes that it is not simply a good idea; it is mandatory. Realists have to be realistic.

### **Q: How much of Cuba’s history with the U.S. does the book cover?**

**A:** After a brief introduction, fourteen chapters are built around the policies of individual U.S. administrations, presented chronologically from Harry Truman through George W. Bush.

### **Q: What makes this history interesting?**

**A:** That’s easy—it is our particular “brand” of realism. We cloak it with a benevolent disposition.

This, too, is nothing new. When asked to explain why he had sent in the Marines to take over

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### **3-3-3 That Infernal Little Cuban Republic**

Cuba in 1906, President Theodore Roosevelt said, “I am doing my best to persuade the Cubans that if only they will be good they will be happy; I am seeking the very minimum of interference necessary to make them good.” Secretary of War William Howard Taft unselfconsciously said the same thing directly to Cubans: “We are here only to help you on. With our arm under your arm, lifting you again on the path of wonderful progress.”

Almost a century later, in 1992, a reporter asked President George H. W. Bush why he would not talk with Fidel Castro now that the Cold War was over. “What’s the point of my talking to him?” Bush replied. “All I’d tell him is what I’m telling you, to give the people the freedom that they want. And then you’ll see the United States do exactly what we should: Go down and lift those people up.”

The problem, of course, is that most people do not want a neighboring power to lift them up, regardless of how well-intentioned its effort might be, and as the initial chapters of my book attempt to explain, Cuba’s revolutionary generation grew up in a society that left it particularly opposed to uplifting by the United States.

#### **Q: Why is knowing the history of U.S. policy toward Cuba important to our understanding of current U.S.-Cuban relations?**

**A:** Today’s policy is the product of a century-old uplifting mentality, and uplifting does not sit well with people who believe in self-determination. I’ve never met a nationalist who wants to be uplifted.

But here a focus on lessons from the past can be deceptive. The reason this book is so long is that today’s uplifting is executed differently; instead of sending in the Marines, we coerce more gently, each new administration taking a slightly different tack.

After the failed attempt at armed overthrow (the Bay of Pigs), Lyndon Johnson set the rough mold that others have filled with their own inventions. Inexperienced in foreign affairs, in 1963 he waited only a few days after JFK’s assassination to seek advice from the widely respected Senator J. William Fulbright, who warned against doing anything dramatic. “I’m not getting into any Bay of Pigs deal,” Johnson interrupted to agree. “No, I’m just asking you what we ought to do to pinch their nuts more than we’re doing.”

Nut pinching has been U.S. policy ever since, and despite a host of imaginative efforts (all detailed in my book), most people who follow Cuba policy closely now are convinced that we can give you shock and awe or we can shower you with our largesse, but we simply are not very good nut pinchers.

#### **Q: What does this book reveal about the future relationship between the U.S. and Cuba?**

**A:** Today’s aging generation of Cuban revolutionaries (and Florida-based Cuban Americans) is rapidly fading away. When the next generation makes changes in Cuba, as it inevitably will, then

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#### **4-4-4 That Infernal Little Cuban Republic**

Cuban Americans' assessments of those changes will slowly diversify until at some point the pollsters will tell everyone it is safe to declare victory without risking the alienation of Florida's Cuban-American voters. The 2008 election suggests that this moment might be closer than many think.

When it arrives, the easy part will be over. The difficult-to-answer question will be whether the United States will ever abandon the ideology of benevolent domination that appears on nearly every page of this book.

In the uplifting vision etched into the 2004 and 2006 reports of the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba, for example, an army of U.S. experts will soon be standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Cuba's post-revolutionary generation, helping construct a new and improved country by implementing the Commission's report.

Perhaps it will work this time, but no one should be surprised if this latest generation of U.S. officials discovers what the Roosevelt-Taft generation of equally optimistic Progressives found a century ago. At that time, Cuba's governor, U.S. General Leonard Wood, complained, "it is next to impossible to make them believe that we have only their own interests at heart."

#### **Q: What challenges will the next U.S. president face in relation to Cuba?**

**A:** President-elect Obama clearly did his polling in south Florida and positioned his campaign accordingly. Specifically, he pledged nothing too radical, but simply a return to the pre-2004 embargo, when Cuban Americans were allowed to make annual family visits and to send fairly large amounts of cash and gift parcels to their relatives on the island.

Those human contacts undermine a hostile policy.

Since most of President-elect Obama's close foreign policy advisers are opposed to the embargo, is change inevitable? No doubt the new president's advisers also recognize that they have to maintain a sense of proportion about small countries like Cuba. They know they will have many problems to confront and always with a limited amount of political capital.

So, do we continue with another four years of nut-pinching lite?

One good bet is that constituent pressure will demand change, and if I had to put my money on the table, it would be on the demographic changes that are occurring in Cuba and south Florida—any government in Washington will probably have to confront fairly rapid change.

But caveat lector: even the best-informed insiders have been predicting rapid change since 1959, when Secretary of State Christian Herter told his British counterpart that the end of the Cuban revolution "is probably only a question of time," when the embassy calculated that it would be

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### **5-5-5 That Infernal Little Cuban Republic**

“months rather than years,” and when CIA director Allen Dulles predicted it would be “something in the range of eight months.”

**Q: What steps must be taken by Washington to normalize the U.S.-Cuban relationship?**

**A:** Short-term, we could simply lift the embargo. Civil society can take it from there; Washington simply needs to get out of the way.

But if Washington wants to take a step that might help the process along, it is to read the Declaration of Independence. It asserts that all people, including presumably the Cubans, have the right to institute their own government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such forms, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.

Revolutionary in its day, most people now endorse Jefferson’s thinking. But some, like Thucydides, still cannot quite square the mental circle: the Declaration of Independence insists on more than self-determination; it also counsels toleration and accommodation.

Cuba’s most revered patriot, José Martí, saw the full circle, and to fellow Cubans he offered this advice in 1891: “One must not attribute, through a provincial antipathy, a fatal and inborn wickedness to the continent’s fair skinned nation simply because it does not speak our language, or see the world as we see it, or resemble us in its political defects, so different from our own.”

After re-reading the Declaration of Independence, the logical and essential step is for Washington to concentrate on controlling its compulsion to uplift, which to Cubans is an especially annoying defect. If we do, then perhaps the citizens of that infernal little island might be a little less irritating.

The only alternative is another half-century of hostility, and in the end there still will be no escape. After all, Fidel Castro concluded in his 1974 interview, “we are neighbors.”

**Q: What do you hope to bring to the study of the relationship between Cuba and the U.S. with this book?**

**A:** I want to highlight our continuing commitment to benevolent domination, which we have never confronted.

**Q: Does the U.S.-Cuban relationship play a role in the United States’ current policies with Latin America?**

**A:** Every poll in recent years indicates that Latin Americans’ regard for the United States has hit rock bottom, and one reason is the intransigent U.S. policy toward Cuba.

Latin Americans’ dislike of Washington’s Cuba policy was seen most recently on October 29, 2008, when the U.N. General Assembly voted for the 17th time to condemn the U.S. embargo of

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## 6-6-6 That Infernal Little Cuban Republic

Cuba. The tally was 185 to 3. All of Latin America—neoconservative to left-populist—every one of them voted against the United States.

Nut pinching is a costly policy. We are perceived as bullying a small neighbor, and for that we are paying an especially exorbitant price in the currency that sometimes matters most, world opinion.

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This interview may be reprinted in its entirety with the following credit: A conversation with Lars Schoultz, author of **THAT INFERNAL LITTLE CUBAN REPUBLIC: THE UNITED STATES AND THE CUBAN REVOLUTION** (University of North Carolina Press, Spring 2009). The text of this interview is available at [www.ibiblio.org/uncp/media/schoultz](http://www.ibiblio.org/uncp/media/schoultz).

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