

Re: Richmond

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Castro Seen Trying to Mend Fences

Being closeted in a face-to-face discussion with Cuba's Fidel Castro is like trying to reason with a fox and a wolf. This was the experience of Reps. Frederick W. Richmond (D-N.Y.) and Richard M. Nolan (D-Minn.) during a recent 4½-hour private session with the voluble, bearded Communist leader in Havana.

The wily Castro, according to their confidential account written for Secretary of State Cyrus R. Vance, was affable most of the time, smilingly professing his wish to mend fences with the United States and his personal liking for President Carter.

He growled impatiently when sensitive topics such as his military intervention in Angola and other African nations were raised.

From the secret report to Vance, here are verbatim excerpts from the Havana dialogue:

Castro conveyed "sincere wishes to improve relations" between Cuba and the United States, noting that several political prisoners had been sprung from Cuban jails at the request of U.S. officials. He added that he's "favorably disposed" to allowing Cubans with dual U.S. citizenship to leave the island if they wish.

Despite run-ins with Carter over points of foreign policy, Castro said he liked the Georgia peanut farmer as a fellow chief of state. The Cuban said he was sure Carter would never condone assassination attempts on his life.

Will Castro, then, meet with President Carter? asked his congressional guests.

"We'll meet," Castro replied with

this political kicker, "during his second term."

Castro indicated he was "favorably disposed" to a suggestion that air service resume between the two countries.

He enthusiastically responded to the idea of cultural exchanges involving painters, dancers, musicians and baseball players. American experts in agriculture and tourism, Castro told the congressmen, would be welcome "at the appropriate time."

But Castro stiffened visibly when his visitors advanced the idea of establishing a U.S. press office in Havana. "I have doubts about this," he retorted. "I do not make unilateral decisions." Then he accused the U.S. press of "telling lies" about his government and his people.

"My comrades are not convinced" that restoring unrestricted American press access to Cuba would be "a positive step," he declared.

All semblance of amiability vanished when the Americans mentioned that Carter, though "eager" to better relations with Cuba, predicated this on Castro's willingness to diminish Cuban military and political meddling in Angola.

"In Africa, we are not willing to compromise. For many years, Cuba was blockaded," he lectured his guests. But despite this enforced isolation, he said, his government managed to develop ties with emerging countries in Africa and Southeast Asia.

"These countries," he emphasized, "also have been trying to become independent." By asking his Communist regime to retreat from Angola, Castro

protested, "the U.S. is now asking Cuba to destroy close links" with these countries.

Now almost into a tirade, Castro declared: "There is no war in Angola" but only "internal problems" with which Cuba wishes to help.

Castro confirmed he has dispatched 900 professionals to Angola but maintained he would "rather send doctors than soldiers." He declared again: "I have no angle in Angola."

Pressed as to why the Cuban troops remained in Africa, he said, "Our policy in Angola is not an anti-North American policy. There is not one fact to say that we're using our friendship with Africa to hurt the United States."

Pursuing his hard-line enunciation, Castro told Richmond and Nolan that he would refuse to allow further departures of Cuban citizens from the island because "if Cuba opened the doors to emigration, many people would leave."

He blamed part of this on the better standard of living in the United States, admitting that his regime "is afraid of losing its professional class." Communism in Cuba "wants to build socialism from the inside" and is against any further "outflow" of talented people, he concluded.

The congressmen left the interview, however, feeling that Castro would like to bridge the diplomatic gulf between Washington and Havana and perhaps loosen Cuba's economic reliance on the Soviet Union.

"Cuba looks like a country trying to divorce a first wife and marry a second," one observer summarized.