

Commentary¹

Mervyn Claxton

Congratulations for a well merited award of an Honorary Doctorate by Havana University and, also, for your excellent acceptance speech with its stirring message, its ringing tones, and its eloquent peroration. I have no doubt that a competent classical scholar would easily identify a Latin rhetorical term (such as *tricolon*, *praeteritio*, or *antonomasia* – all Latin oratorical techniques, the recurring use of which a classics scholar recently recognized in Obama's speeches) to describe the technique you used in your powerful ending, where you enumerated each of the reasons why the rest of the Caribbean and other peoples owe an unpayable debt to the Cuban people. Each paragraph in your multi-paragraph peroration begins with the word "For" and ends with the phrase *la deuda es impagable*, the cumulative effect of which created a crescendo carrying the reader/listener aloft on the cadences of your oratory right up to the climax in your last sentence/paragraph: "*For giving universal meaning to the 'Patria' in the pledge, 'Patria or Muerte, Venceremos!'*, *la deuda es impagable.*" The award was both a recognition of the enormous academic contribution you have made to our knowledge of the economics of development as well as for your unwavering commitment to the cause of the South. The fact that your award coincided with the 50th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution is of undoubted significance.

The Cuban Revolution was, as you rightly said, a source of inspiration to many Caribbeans "*on the ability of a small Caribbean country to chart its own course of social justice, economic transformation, and national independence by relying on the mobilisation of the entire population, by relying on the will and energy of its people; with a leadership that trusted the mass of the population.....[and that] It remains so to this day.*" Unfortunately, the many who were inspired by the Cuban Revolution were (and still are) too few to influence the other Caribbean countries to follow Cuba's example of relying on the mobilisation of the entire population and on the will and energy of Caribbean people in charting their own course of "*social justice, economic transformation, and national independence.*"

I am one of those who at the time thought, and still think, that Cuba had no choice in seeking/accepting an alliance with the Soviet Union even though Castro must surely have realized that such a move would inevitably make the country a pawn in the global, geopolitical chess game

¹ On *The Debt is Unpayable*, by Norman Girvan

in which the two major players in the Cold War were then engaged. Cuba's compulsory nationalization of its sugar industry (when its American absentee owners rejected Castro's offer to compensate them for their "loss" at the very low estimated value they, themselves, had deliberately placed on their possessions for purposes of local taxation) led to America's decision not to purchase Cuba's sugar crop which it had previously bought, in its entirety, at preferential rates that were well above existing world market rates. The Soviet Union stepped in to fill the breach and offered to purchase Cuba's entire crop. It was the only country in the world, that was not amenable to American influence, which could have done so. Like that of the mafia Godfather in Mario Puzo's book and Francis Ford Coppola's filmed version of it, it was an offer Cuba could not refuse. Cuba's economy would have immediately collapsed if no buyer had come forward for its huge sugar crop. Nothing is free in this world (even love, according to some) and Cuba had to pay a price for Soviet assistance, one that was paid in strategic and geopolitical currency.

I am afraid that I cannot agree with the argument advanced by Lloyd Best in his essay Independent Thought and Caribbean Freedom which you cited, namely, that Cuba's turning to the Soviet Union was a symptom of the failure of the rest of the Caribbean to provide moral, political and economic support for its struggle for self-determination. Even if the rest of the Caribbean were sufficiently mature politically, sufficiently confident culturally, and sufficiently united in their feelings of solidarity towards Cuba and in their determination to do what they could to help our sister Caribbean country, there was little or nothing the rest of the region could have done to provide Cuba with a viable alternative. But, alas, in all of those respects the Caribbean was found wanting.

In the passage you quoted, Lloyd claimed: *"If the opportunity was missed then, it was largely for lack of political experience."* If, indeed, there was an opportunity missed then (the existence of which I am not at all convinced), it would not have been due to a lack of political experience but rather to a lack of political maturity. They are not the same, and the one does not necessarily lead to the other. At the time, we were not sufficiently mature politically (in the sense of emancipation from the colonial mentality which made us identify imperial interests as our very own. Even 50 years later, as we approach the end of the first decade of the 21st century, we still do not appear to have attained that maturity, as the EPA issue has revealed. The entire Caribbean would not have been aroused to provide moral, political and economic support to Cuba for its struggle for self-determination. Support for Cuba would have come only from a handful of enlightened intellectuals (there are many who aren't enlightened), representing an infinitesimally small proportion of the region's population, and a few regional anti-imperialists. Neither were we culturally confident, in the

sense of placing value on our own culture. I remember attending an Independence Day celebration at the State House of a Caribbean country in the mid-sixties at which no rum or local food snacks were served. There was every type of foreign alcoholic drink available – Scotch, brandy, champagne, gin, vodka etc. but not the one liquor that is produced locally. We were too culturally chained to the North.

Oscar Wilde once said that an idealist is someone who knows the value of everything and the price of nothing and that a realist is someone who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing. We need both idealists and realists in the Caribbean - idealists to provide us with inspiration and realists to tell us what is possible and what is not. Whatever else it may be, politics is surely the art of the possible. But there must be a judicious dosage of idealism and realism, and there was much more idealism than realism in Lloyd's argument that Eric William's agreement to leave the US in control of the Chaguaramas Naval Base base meant that *"an historic opportunity had been missed for a linkage of anti-imperialist issues across the Caribbean, from Trinidad in the east to Cuba in the west; to forge an 'integration of the regional consciousness'."*

According to Lloyd, as quoted by you: *"And even if the marines had come. Would we not have fought them as the Cubans were in any case to do against their agents at the Bay of Pigs and the Constitutionalists, in Santo Domingo in 1965? How much territory could they have held if they had had the whole Caribbean roused against them? And even if they did hold territory – for a while – they would never have enjoyed any moral conquest and the satisfaction of seeing Cuba turn to another imperialism for support. And the Caribbean would have emerged from the struggle as morally and politically integrated as it has always been culturally. . . ."*

That was pie-in-the-sky idealism, a pure exercise in wishful thinking on Lloyd's part. If Trinidad and Tobago had nationalised the base, proclaimed independence, and joined Cuba in taking over the sugar industry, as Lloyd suggested it could/should have done, T&T would not only have provoked US counter action, as happened in the case of Cuba, but it would also have provoked that of Britain, especially if, like Cuba, T&T was compelled to have recourse to the Soviet Union to purchase its sugar and, more importantly, its oil because of the closing down of Western outlets for the two products that accounted for more than 95% of T&T's economy. Much like dictatorships on the brink of being overthrown, imperial powers that are about to lose their empires often over-react to any perceived threat to their imperial power or status.

Dean Acheson, President Truman's Secretary of State, as he witnessed Britain's struggle to come to terms with its greatly diminished post-war power and status, famously declared that "*Britain has lost an empire but has not yet found a role*". Predictably, Acheson's remark caused a furore in Britain which (together with another fading imperial power in a similar situation) made one last abortive effort to reassert its power, with the Anglo-French invasion of the Suez Canal in 1956. That last desperate imperial fling failed because the US not only did not support it but also condemned it in terms that left the two superannuated imperial powers no choice other than to comply with America's wishes. To erase the humiliation of that sorry event and also for reasons of imperial pride, Britain would surely have jumped at the opportunity to join forces with the US to crush any attempt to make T&T's petroleum resources available to the Soviet Union or to place the country (which is situated in an area of at least equal strategic importance to that of Cuba) in the Soviet sphere of influence.

Moreover, the possible scenario Lloyd outlined seems to ignore the factor of William's character and background. Most anti-colonialists of William's generation, and many of the succeeding generation also, entertain a love-hate relationship with the "mother country". That appears to have been the case with Williams, as it is with Robert Mugabe who is of a later generation. They may rail all they want against the imperial or colonial power but deep down inside they feel a grudging respect and even some affection for it. When push comes to shove, when their back is against the wall, the gut instinct of such early anti-colonialists, who never did succeed in liberating themselves psychologically from the colonial power, is to turn to the latter rather than against it. At the period of the 1970 "February Revolution" the T&T government had its back very much to the wall. Push had come to shove and the government was facing the very real prospect of imminent overthrow by rebel elements of the regiment. What did Williams do? Did he turn to the Soviet Union for assistance in taming the rebellion? No. Being a realist, Williams swallowed his anti-imperialist pride and turned to Britain and the United States, from which he requested military assistance. Surprisingly, they either refused it or temporised for such a long time that there came a point when it was no longer needed. I would have thought that the U.S., especially, would have been eager to help crush a left-wing in military coup d'état in their own backyard. After all, the 1970s was a period when the U.S. was busy overthrowing, or participating in the overthrow of, left-wing régimes throughout the region. Perhaps, when everything is known about U.S. policy and actions surrounding that event, one may discover the covert hand of the CIA. Williams might have been too independent-minded for the U.S. liking.

In one of the paragraphs of the article you quoted, Lloyd did evoke the possibility of the other Caribbean countries selling out (*"as they did in 1953 when the PPP ran into trouble in Guyana"* in his own words), if T&T's hypothetical nationalization of Chaguaramas base and the sugar industry had provoked the US to send in the marines. The action of the OECS countries in 1983, more than two decades later, in publicly associating itself with the US invasion of Grenada would suggest that such a reaction on the part of other Caribbean countries (none of which had yet gained their independence) was a near certainty. When, in October 1983, Reagan announced on national television that the US had invaded Grenada at the invitation of the OECS countries, Eugenia Charles, Dominica's prime minister and Head of the OECS at the time, was by his side. To their credit, the Bahamas, Belize, Guyana, and Trinidad were the only Caribbean countries that were opposed to the military intervention.

That official Caribbean invitation was met by consternation and bewilderment throughout the South. I personally witnessed how country delegations from the South, attending the Unesco General Conference that same month, cold shouldered the delegations from the Caribbean countries which had approved and participated in the invasion. The latter were so concerned by the treatment they received, a concern they freely expressed to me, that the delegation heads of the countries involved (all ministers) sought a meeting with M'Bow, the Senegalese Director-General to "explain" their countries' action, in the hope that he, in turn, would help calm the situation by speaking to key delegations from the South. I deliberately did not accompany the Caribbean ministers when they went to see the Director-General, as I would normally have done in my position as Head of the Caribbean Section in Unesco's External Relations department. I wanted no part of it.

You stated in your address that we will never forget *"the unequivocal condemnation by Cuba of the murder of Maurice Bishop and several others when that process came to a tragic end, and the Cubans who gave their lives in the invasion that followed."* One of the "several others" murdered was the Minister of Education, Jackie Creft, with whom I had held discussions on Unesco-Grenada affairs in St. George's only three months before those horrible events. I remember her coming to have a sundowner with me at the Spice Island Inn where I was staying, on the evening before I flew back to Paris. Jackie brought along her son, Vladimir, a very cute boy about six years old. I do hope he survived. Murdering one's political rivals or opponents to get them out of the way is an atrocious African practice which one would have hoped would never have migrated to the Caribbean. We seem to adopt the worst Africa has to offer and to ignore the best.

One day, a few years after that bloody coup d'état, I was strolling along a street in the old part of Havana, when someone tapped me on the shoulder. When I turned around, I recognized Jackie Creff's personal bodyguard. I had first met him in Paris when Jackie unexpectedly turned up with him for a dinner at home, to which I had invited her and several other Caribbean ministers who were attending an extraordinary session of Unesco's General Conference the year before the coup d'état. I expressed my surprise, telling Jackie that I did not even know that she had a bodyguard for I had seen none in Grenada. She told me that, on Bishop's instructions, all ministers had to be accompanied by a bodyguard whenever they travelled abroad. That statement of hers came to my mind the following year when she came with Vladimir to my hotel on the eve of my return to Paris. She drove her own car and had no bodyguard in attendance. Bishop had made a terrible mistake, as he must have realized during the last hours of his life. The real danger came from within, not from without. If he and his ministers had had bodyguards in Grenada, they might not have been caught unawares. Jackie's former bodyguard told me, when we met in Havana, that he had been whisked away to safety in Cuba by some Cubans who left the country immediately after the marxist coup d'état that cost Jackie her life.

You quoted George Beckford's comment on the three important contrasts with the rest of the Caribbean that had impressed him: *"..First, the conspicuous absence of symptoms of unemployment (and underemployment); the signs of poverty are much less stark than elsewhere in the region – there is no prostitution and no begging of any kind, not even the covert kind of begging which produces 'tipping' in other places."* Although I have not travelled "the length and breadth of the country", as Beckford apparently did, I too was impressed by much the same things as he. With regard to prostitution, however, the situation has changed considerably since Beckford wrote that piece in the late 1960s (?) – since the demise of the Soviet Union which brought an end to the massive annual assistance Cuba received from it. I, myself, have not visited Cuba since that epoch changing event but I have seen several television news items and documentaries which clearly show Cuban prostitutes plying their trade. A few of them agreed to be interviewed on film with their faces hidden to conceal their identity. It transpires that many Cuban prostitutes are not professional at all but women with families and ordinary jobs that do not provide them sufficient to live on, which forces them to resort to part-time prostitution simply to make ends meet.

With respect to tipping, it may well be a "covert kind of begging" but, where tipping waiters and hotel workers is forbidden or illegal, some other form of incentive is needed to motivate such workers, otherwise restaurant diners and hotel guests are made to pay in a much less covert way. One of the

more accepted origins of the term "to tip" is the practice in English 16th-century taverns of placing a notice next to a small receptacle, on the table where the tavern's clients ate, which read "To Insure Promptitude". I found eating a meal in a hotel restaurant in Havana to be an extremely frustrating experience. There was absolutely no "promptitude", presumably because there was no tipping to "Insure" it. Even when the restaurant was almost empty, it took ages to get served in the obviously over-staffed hotel restaurant, and the time I waited to be served the next course seemed endless. I would think that such "service" is sufficiently frustrating to make tourists hesitate before visiting the country a second time. But perhaps Cuba has cleaned up its act since the ending of Soviet aid compelled it to turn to tourism to meet a part of its foreign exchange needs. Tipping is generally forbidden in Jamaican hotels which charge an all-inclusive price for staying there but I have always had very good service in them, which indicates that the hotel management made use of other incentives to their staff to provide good service. Cuba should be able to do the same, if it has not already done so.

I was particularly impressed by the conspicuous absence of another telling sign of poverty – the healthy mien of the obviously well-fed children I crossed in the streets of Havana, by their laughter and playfulness, and by the fact that they were ALL, without exception, attending school as their school uniforms attested. The comparison I made was less with the Caribbean region than with other regions in the South (including Latin America) I had lived in or visited. There were none of the hungry-looking children with heart-wrenchingly sad faces loitering on the streets of Havana that one saw in Rio de Janeiro, Bogota, Caracas, and virtually all towns and cities in Latin America and in Africa. In a Washington Post article earlier this week, [Brazilian Companies Step In To Educate Future Workforce](#), the author argues that the economic development of Brazil and that of Latin America, in general, are handicapped by their poor education systems. Cuba is a striking exception

I need not tell you that the following comment of Beckford you quoted reflects my own position: *"The national and international awareness of the population at all levels and the general atmosphere of national cohesion, of public order, and of self-confidence are certainly not characteristic of the rest of the Caribbean"*. Cuban cultural confidence is reflected in the country's independent foreign policy, in the sense Cubans have of their own identity, in their sporting and artistic attainments, and in their medical, scientific, and technological accomplishments. Cuba's achievements in classical ballet are remarkable by any standards. Beginning from scratch in 1948, Alicia Alonso created the Cuban National Ballet company and transformed it, within a few decades, into one of the world's best. Its top dancers are eagerly sought by leading ballet companies all over the world. Star dancers from

those companies regularly visit Havana to dance and train with the Cuban national ballet, still directed by Alicia Alonso although she is in her mid-eighties.

Alicia Alonso also created and directs the Cuban National Ballet School, which is the world's largest, accepting gifted students from all over the world. What has most impressed foreign choreographers and top ballet dancers is the cultural stamp Cuba has placed on its ballet - its harmonious blend of excellent technique with a dynamic style of dancing that is unmistakably Cuban. Cuban ballet dancers win more prizes at international ballet competitions than those of any other country. I well remember three dancers from Cuba's national ballet dominating the classical section of the 8th International Dance competition held in Paris in 1998. Two of them, Yosvani Ramos and Rolando Sarabia (both former gold medallists at the annual Varna International ballet competition in Bulgaria, the most prestigious in the world) won first prize and the Grand Prix de la Ville de Paris, respectively, in the male category, and the second prize was won by a third Cuban dancer, Howard Quintero. The very knowledgeable Parisian audience was reportedly stunned by Sarabia's extraordinary technique and artistry.

One of the things that has struck me most about Cuban ballet is the immense prestige it enjoys in Cuba among BOTH sexes. Cuba seems to have erased the feeling, which still prevails in popular opinion in virtually every other country, that classical Ballet is not a manly pursuit and that boys and men who indulge in it are either sissies or homosexuals. In Cuba, classical ballet is a pursuit in which high achievement bestows immense prestige on boys and girls alike, in the eyes of their peers as well as in those of the nation as a whole. Cuba's champion dancers, male or female, are national heroes. They appear to enjoy the type of public adulation that star footballers enjoy in most countries in the world. I consider it a remarkable achievement that a country with a macho Latin American culture could have brought about such a radical change in public attitudes. That remarkable achievement certainly challenges conventional opinion in the North that certain cultural attitudes and practices in the South, like the extended family system for example, which are deemed inimical to development, are too deeply entrenched to be eradicated. What neither Northern development economists nor, alas, many from the South realize is that such practices do not need to be eradicated at all, they can be culturally reinterpreted or adapted to meet the needs of modern society.

Indeed, countries of the South can learn a very valuable lesson from that Cuban achievement, one that could be applied across the entire social spectrum to promote an alternative, culturally

compatible form of development. As a 1983 article by Kiyosi Hiroshima & Philip Morgan (The Persistence of Extended Family Residence in Japan: Anachronism or Alternative Strategy?), in the *American Sociological Review*, demonstrates, the extended family households of traditional village society have carried over into modern Japan. Census results show that instead of the number of such households decreasing under the impact of modernization, as occurred in the West during the early modern period, the proportion of extended family households in modern Japan is actually increasing. That pattern is maintained by the persistence of traditional family values and the strong ties which traditionally bond the Japanese family, although modernization has eroded them to some extent. The extended-family household is expected to remain a feature of modern Japanese society for the foreseeable future. Instead of abandoning the traditional family structure to make way for modernization, the Japanese adapted it to the demands of modern society in a way that enabled them to preserve their cherished traditional family values. As Hiroshima & Morgan observed: "Extended residence is not an anachronism. Rather it offers an appealing alternative to some of the most modern segments of contemporary Japanese society." It could also offer an appealing alternative to African and other societies in the South where a similar social feature prevails.

Among the several activities you singled out for mention, was the science and technology policy research Cuba embarked on in the 1970s. I personally benefited from Cuba's remarkable achievements in that area. In the late 1980s, I had a pair of bi-focal contact lenses made for me in Havana, in a single day. It was at a time when such advanced technology was still in the R&D stage in countries in the North. I was most impressed.

As the Washington Post reported a few days ago, Jeffrey M. Puryear and Tamara Ortega Goodspeed, in a contribution to a book published this year, entitled Can Latin America Compete?, made the following observation about Latin America: *"The region's limited number of scientists and advanced degree recipients weakens the region's competitiveness by limiting countries' ability to use and generate knowledge, and to carry out research."* As in the case of education, medicine/health care, and many other key areas of development, that general comment does not apply to Cuba, whose many achievements strike a stark contrast with the corresponding situation in rest of the Latin American region.

The comment you made re the total absence of a sense of superiority on the part of Cubans, their non-materialistic value system, their willingness to share and their solidarity with others are, most unfortunately, at the opposite end of the spectrum of values prevailing in virtually all other societies

in the Western hemisphere, where, as in the US, individualism reigns supreme, money is king, and everyone is too busy looking out for Numero Uno to care what happens to his fellowman. The consequences of that latter situation are an exclusive rather than the inclusive society Cuba has succeeded in creating, and rates of violence which increase exponentially, compelling those who can afford it to live in gated communities in order to protect life and limb. That is the type of "civilized", inegalitarian society which the US and its country fellow travellers would like to see replace Cuba's egalitarian society. Regrettably, local conditions have brought gated communities to certain Caribbean countries.

I was amused by your anecdote on "convertible roubles". It is a typical case of Orwellian double-speak which is reflected, for example, in the name of the Soviet Union's government newspaper "Pravda", a word that means "Truth" in Russian. That remarkably perceptive Orwellian term finds modern expression, for example, in the penchant of dictatorial or illiberal régimes to include the term "Democratic" in their country's official name. Thus, the Democratic Republic of Korea, is the name of dictatorial North, not that of the democratic South. Similarly with the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which has never been democratic other than in name. Indeed, the presence of "Democratic" in the name of a country is a sure fire sign that it is anything but. I have not been able to work out whether the systematic inclusion of "democratic" in the names of such countries is an unconscious Freudian slip on their part or a deliberate poke in the eyes of the West. Perhaps a bit of both.

I like your anecdote about overhearing your 10-year old daughter telling a friend — *"In Cuba, everyone is the same"*. You cannot fool children. They immediately recognize the truth in a situation and they also have an amazing capacity to notice things that often escape adults, a capacity that, unlike every other, diminishes rather than grows with age and experience. As children get older they are "corrupted" by the opinions and prejudices of their parents and their social milieu. I have also noticed the capacity of children to pose fundamental questions about life. The more knowledge we acquire the fewer questions we tend to ask (both of ourselves and of others) and the less fundamental those questions become. We adults seldom revisit fundamental issues for which we consider we have already acquired the answers. We therefore cease to pose and re-pose questions about them, which reduces our capacity to call ourselves in question. I cannot count the number of occasions I have come across highly intelligent individuals who would make categorical statements on subjects/topics/issues about which they have read nothing, and thought less, since leaving university. Children, on the other hand, do not know enough for it to act as a barrier preventing them from continuing to ask fundamental questions about life. I find their questions very refreshing, for

they often make me see an issue from a totally different angle, one that would not normally have occurred to me to explore.

You explained Cuba's achievement in the following terms: *"So I want to say that, in my simple way of seeing things, I believe that this 'miracle' can only be explained by the practice of a profound participatory democracy in Cuba, with a leadership that explains everything, a people that discusses everything, an economic adjustment that was equitably shared, and a people determined to defend their Revolution and their independence, no matter what the cost."* The only thing in that explanation with which I can't possibly agree is the bit about participatory democracy. I should think that Cuba is anything but a participatory democracy or, if it is, it is so only in a very limited sense. Cubans may participate in decisions about the running of their local district or in matters that do not have a national scope but, unless I am very mistaken, Cubans do not/can not participate in policy decisions on political, economic, or social issues.

Furthermore, many basic rights that are taken for granted in most of the world are denied to Cubans. There is no freedom of assembly except at the behest of their self-appointed leaders who are subsequently confirmed in one-horse-race elections. They can neither choose or dismiss their own leaders, nor can they, without risking their liberty or government harassment, hold public demonstrations against them or their decisions. Cubans do not have unrestricted access to internet nor can they leave and return to the country at will.

Cuba has many achievements to its credit, but participatory democracy is certainly not one of them. Having said that, there is no doubt in my mind that, most poor people in Latin America would much prefer to live in Cuba than in any other Latin American country. Claude Levy-Strauss, the doyen of French anthropologists who fêted his 100th birthday in an avalanche of national accolades a little more than two weeks ago, was one of the first to call in question the concept of democracy for very poor people. Discussing the desperate situation of the very poor in Latin America several decades ago, Levy-Strauss declared that democracy is meaningless to someone who does not know when he is going to eat his next meal. Recently, Rigoberta Menchu, the Guatemalan Nobel Peace Laureate enquired rhetorically what kind of democracy is this that gives you the freedom to starve, to be homeless, unemployed, and deprived of medical care? The grave implications of such a situation for the people concerned seems to have escaped the notice of those in the West and the North, in general, who continually harp about democracy while neglecting basic social and economic rights, which are accorded much greater priority by most countries in the South.

In addition to the classic political rights that the West/North hold so dear, South Africa enshrined, in its post-apartheid constitution, the right to education, to good health, to decent housing, and to a decent standard of living. The South African constitution also made social justice an essential objective. Indeed, like India and several countries in other regions of the South, the African notion of justice appears to be restricted to the concept of "social justice", Social justice in Africa is whatever increases the well-being of the community, assures group cohesiveness, and maintains harmony in the group or the community. One sees this concept illustrated by Cuban society.

The US goes on and on about Cuba's violation of its people's (political) human rights. In a report it released in January 2008, the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation (CCDHRN), which is definitely NOT a government body, drew up a list of political prisoners in Cuba, which amounted to a grand total of 234, only 72 of whom are considered by Amnesty International to fall within that category. Even that relatively small number of political prisoners is unacceptable but when it is compared with the several hundred prisoners the US incarcerated at Guantanamo as enemy combatants, in blatant violation of their human and political rights and, also, of international law, the vast majority of whom US army authorities admit should not have been there at all, Cuba's alleged violations in that respect are placed in a proper perspective.

The 25-member bipartisan Senate Armed Services Committee issued a report last Thursday (11 December) on the human violations committed at Guantanamo which is utterly damning for the US Government. It concluded that Rumsfeld and other top administration Bush administration officials bear direct responsibility for the harsh treatment of detainees at Guantanamo, and that their decisions led to more serious abuses in Iraq and elsewhere. The report, which was based on official documents and Congressional testimony, and was approved by all but one of the members - a Republican - makes illuminating reading. It concluded that: *"The abuse of detainees in U.S. custody cannot simply be attributed to the actions of 'a few bad apples' acting on their own. The fact is that senior officials in the United States government solicited information on how to use aggressive techniques, redefined the law to create the appearance of their legality, and authorized their use against detainees.....It is particularly troubling that senior officials approved the use of interrogation techniques that were originally designed to simulate abusive tactics used by our enemies against our own soldiers and were modeled, in part, on tactics used by the Communist Chinese to elicit false confessions from U.S. military personnel."*

Furthermore, even the US has not accused Cuba of torturing its political prisoners, which is/was certainly not the case with American detainees at Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib. Neither was it the case with the thousands of Chilean and Argentinian political prisoners under the military régimes, respectively, of Pinochet and Videla. The number of Argentina's "desparecidos" (Argentinians who "disappeared" into thin air under Videla's rule) is estimated at no less than 17,000. The US not only supported those two bloody regimes without one official word of criticism for their human rights violations (if one could call taking live prisoners out to sea in helicopters and throwing them out from a great height a violation of their human rights) but also, apparently, provided them with appropriate technical US aid to render those violations more effective.

Cuba's lesser human rights violations, though they should be condemned, are understandable to some extent because the country has had to live for the past five decades under an unrelenting seige by the most powerful country in the world situated only 90 miles away from it, which has not only tried to invade it but has also attempted to kill Castro on several occasions. It is not surprising that Castro became so paranoid that he regards all domestic opponents as possible American agents in local disguise. Moreover, a country in a state of war, as Castro sees Cuba with some justification, invariably places national security above human rights. The US has not hesitated to do that with the so-called War on Terror.

But there is a more apt example with which Cuba's past and present actions can be compared, of which little or no mention is made when Human Rights violations by countries are denounced in the North. The distance between Japan and California is 5,478 miles (as compared to the 90 miles separating the US from Cuba) and America was never in danger of being invaded by Japan as was the case with Cuba for many years. Nonetheless, after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066 authorizing the American military to bypass the constitutional safeguards of American citizens in the name of national defense. Under that Executive Order, people of Japanese ancestry living on the West Coast were banned from residing and working in certain locations. There was mass evacuation and incarceration of more than 120,000 Japanese Americans, two-thirds of whom were U.S. citizens. They were detained for up to four years, without due process of law and in the absence of any factual evidence of wrongdoing, and forced to live in remote camps behind barbed wire, under armed surveillance. Thus, Japanese Americans were forcibly removed from their homes, farms, schools, jobs, and businesses by the U.S. Government and placed in internment camps for the

duration of the War in the Pacific. Family members were even separated in some cases. It is most significant that German Americans did not suffer the same fate.

A web site dedicated to preserving the testimonies of Japanese Americans unjustly incarcerated during World War II, before their memories are extinguished, has the following chilling analysis of the official euphemistic terminology the US Government employed to disguise the true nature of the situation of the detainees, in much the same way the Nazis were doing, at the very same period, with the German death camps which they euphemistically called "work camps":

"In early 1942, Japanese Americans were forcibly removed from the West Coast and forbidden to return. The government called this an "evacuation," a euphemism that implies it was done as a precaution for Japanese Americans' own safety, when in fact, it was motivated by economic greed and racial prejudice. "Exclusion" or "mass removal" are better terms, because Japanese Americans were expelled from the West Coast and forbidden to return. At first, Japanese Americans were rounded up in temporary camps that the government called "Assembly Centers," in which they were surrounded by fences and forbidden to leave without permission. The terms "temporary incarceration camps" or "temporary prison camps" better convey the nature of these facilities. After exclusion, Japanese Americans were confined within camps that the government called "Relocation Centers." In fact, they were prisons--surrounded by barbed wire fences and patrolled by armed guards--which Japanese Americans could not leave without permission. "Relocation center" is a euphemism that inadequately describes the harsh conditions and forced confinement of the camps, thus terms such as "incarceration camp" or "prison camp" are used. As prison camps outside the normal criminal justice system, designed to confine civilians for military or political purposes on the basis of race and ethnicity, these so-called relocation centers also fit the definition of "concentration camps". The term "internment" is problematic when applied to American citizens. Technically, internment refers to the detention of enemy aliens during time of war, and two-thirds of the Japanese Americans incarcerated were U.S. citizens."

Perhaps, a more relaxed, less hysterical, American administration, like Obama's, might encourage Cuban leaders to develop a political system that would allow Cubans a greater political and economic choice while preserving the country's immense achievements which you mentioned in your address. If Cuba fails to do so, its socio-political system will remain shaky and the country will continue to see the brightest and most gifted of its citizens defect whenever the opportunity presents itself. One of the country's star ballet dancers, whom I mentioned above, Rolando Sarabia,

defected to the US last year while he was on a tour there. Cuban defectors do not generally embark on such an irreversible course of action, cutting themselves off forever from friends, family, and country for mere money. They do so because of the desire every human being has to make his/her own choices in life. The experience of East Germans after the Reunification would suggest that, when faced with the choice of living in an individualistic, free-for-all, devil-take-the-hindmost society, like that of America (and to a lesser extent like that of other Western societies), on the one hand, or living at home with fewer material comforts but greater freedom to live their lives, such as the right to travel abroad when they wish, on the other, Cubans would choose the latter. As several studies have shown, most East Germans find the Western-type culture of West Germany rather disorienting. They miss the cocoon of socio-economic security provided by East Germany's social planning model which offered protection to the citizen from cradle to grave and the group solidarity that is characteristic of a society with collectivist values despite the downside of that model, with its political restrictions and the need to be constantly on their guard because Big Brother and its principal agent, the Stasi, was always watching and listening. Consequently, many former East Germans harbour much nostalgia for the pre-Reunification East German society.

The following comment made by Walter Rodney which you cited: "*West Indians live more in time and than in space*", reminds me of my first sojourn in Africa as a young man where I thought I "discovered" where our unhurried, unpunctual, non-deadline respecting attitude towards life originated. For Northern/Western people, time is a precise quantity whereas for Africans, who feel no need to situate an event in its precise place in the continuum, it is more of a general concept. For Africans who have not yet become totally transformed by Western culture, stress, boredom, and haste are Western problems, not African ones. Waiting is a feature of life that is common to both Western and African cultures, but the types of waiting one finds in Africa are not generally attuned to the clock. They do not involve internal conflicts that create stress as, for example, the stress caused by hurrying to meet a deadline and worrying that one would not be able to respect it.

The African philosopher, John Mbiti ([African Religions and Philosophy](#), 1969), observed that, for Africans, time is the result of what all agents in the world do and how this interacts, which means that there is no available "amount" of time. Time is "spun" by the forces of nature. In Swahili, for example, there is really no equivalent of an expression one frequently hears in the time-conscious West, "I have no time". The nearest Swahili expression is *nilikuwa na nafasi bado*. ("I did not yet have the opportunity"). A 31-minute Spanish-Senegalese film [Binta and the Great Idea](#), which won

an Oscar nomination last year in the short film category, explored the differences between Western and African concepts of time and certain other cultural attitudes to life in a subtly revealing way.

A young African girl called Binta, who serves as the narrator in the film, talks about her father and his 'great idea' which he wants to present to the provincial leader. Binta's father is a fisherman in a small Senegalese village whose friend, recently returned from a visit to Europe, tells him about Europeans being able to catch thousands of fish with bigger boats equipped with sonar, which gives him the desire to obtain a permit from the government for a bigger boat. His friend advises Binta's father, however, that once he begins to earn lots of money with his bigger boat he would need to get a permit for a weapon so that he would be able to protect his newly-acquired wealth from others. Binta's father is intrigued by the wrist watch his friend acquired in Europe which has an alarm that is set to ring every day at noon. "What happens at noon?" Binta's father asks. "Why, the alarm rings" is his friend's response.

When Binta's father finally gets to meet the provincial leader, we learn what his great idea is. He wants to help make the world a better place by adopting a *tubab* (white child), "preferably weaned", in order to teach him/her qualities that Western industrialized society has largely lost, such as sharing, solidarity, the sustainable use of resources, and the true meaning of progress and humanity. The North would then be able to acquire that precious knowledge from the *tubab* when the latter becomes an adult. Perhaps, one day in the not too distant future, people in other Caribbean countries, and in Latin America, might come to appreciate what Cuba can teach them about sharing, solidarity, and the true meaning of progress and humanity.

Finally, you mentioned Cuba's contribution to the liberation of southern Africa. I am glad that you mentioned it for, in my opinion, the crucial importance of the role Cuba played in southern Africa has not been accorded the level of recognition or appreciation it deserves. Cuban troops landed in Angola in November 1975 just in time to roundly defeat a South African force which was only two hours away from capturing Luanda, the capital. In the course of the following 15 years, 3,000 of the 50,000 Cuban troops who fought in Angola were killed. The battle for the town of Cuito Cuanavale in 1988, at which Angolan and Cuban forces routed the South African army, is considered to be Africa's greatest battle since El Alamein. It resulted in South Africa's withdrawal from Angola and Namibia, which assured not only the survival of the revolutionary regimes of those two countries but also that of Mozambique. It also hastened the end of apartheid.

It is most significant that the Vietcong/North Vietnamese and Cuban armies are the only ones from a country in the South that were feared by armies from the West and the North. Apartheid South Africa realized, from the very beginning, that the arrival of Cuban forces would pose a serious threat to their hegemonic plans for southern Africa. They were not mistaken. Why do numerically superior Arab armies cut so sorry a figure when faced with the numerically inferior Israeli army. How could a handful of European mercenaries make and break African regimes with such ridiculous ease, as they did over the period between the 1960s and 1990s? African national armies, with their pot-bellied colonels and generals, became more and more of a laughing stock with each successful coup d'état in the region carried out, or aided, by a few European mercenaries.

Bob Denard, a colourful French soldier of fortune, was perhaps the archetype European mercenary. Denard and his fellow mercenaries took pride in the name they earned, *Les Affreux* (the Dreaded ones), by their military exploits in Africa. Denard, who died last year at age 78, is reputed to have inspired Frederick Forsyth's novel (and subsequent film) about European mercenaries in Africa, *The Dogs of War*. He once declared in an interview "we were soldiers of the West," engaged in the fight against Communism. In 1975, the same year Cuban forces first landed in Africa, Denard organized a coup d'état against President Ahmed Abdallah Abderemane of the Comoros Islands. Three years later, he reinstated Abdallah and became the country's de facto leader as head of the presidential guard, from which strategic post Denard effectively ran the country behind the scenes.

The strong prevailing suspicion that France used to give a wink and a nod to Denard's mercenary activities in Africa because they served to keep recalcitrant Francophone African régimes in line, was subsequently confirmed by the testimony a former French foreign intelligence official gave at Denard's trial, the year before his death. Denard was tried for taking part in an umpteenth coup d'état in the Comoros Islands, presumably one that went against France's interests. According to an Agence France-Presse report of the trial, the former intelligence official indicated that many of Denard's activities had the tacit approval of the French government. As he informed the court: *"When special services are unable to undertake certain kinds of undercover operations, they use parallel structures. This was the case with Bob Denard."*

That is neither important or exceptional, for the CIA, the British, Belgian, and other European clandestine services have acted just like the French. What is important is why North Vietnam/the Vietcong and Cuba were different from all the other countries in the South, in their ability to more

than hold their own in armed conflict with countries from the industrialized North. The reason seems to be a combination of cultural confidence, the total absence of any feeling of inferiority towards the North on their part, and the power of an idea – an idea of their individual and national self-worth and their firm conviction that they were fighting for a cause worth dying for.

In an article entitled Cuba's role in Africa (2002), Saul Landau (Director of Digital Media and International Outreach for the College of Letters, Arts and Social Sciences at the California State Polytechnic University Pomona) discussed a newly published book by Piero Gleijeses, Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington and Africa, 1959-1976, which tells the story of how Cuba and the United States competed for control of Angola in what became a major battle for third world territory – "as well as hearts and minds in Africa."

Landau's article is so significant and revealing on how Cuba effectively thwarted US Cold War plans in southern Africa (including information on the cameo roles Jamaica and Guyana played in that enterprise) and the decisive contribution it made to the liberation of the entire region that I shall conclude this rather long commentary on your excellent acceptance address in Havana by citing the following large chunks from it, without comment for none is needed:

"Imagine, in the fall of 1975, as the high level US-Cuban discussions proceeded, how Kissinger must have responded when informed that Fidel Castro had sent troops to fight in Angola. Indeed, unbeknownst to the public, Kissinger had previously launched a covert military action to prevent the pro-Soviet and pro-Cuban MPLA (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola) from assuming power. The United States was paying two rival Angolan factions."

"The CIA plan involved coordinating US actions with the South African defense force, which would invade Angola from the South, pretending -- so that it didn't look like an official apartheid white army invading a black country again -- that the troops were working with an anti-MPLA, tribal-based group called UNITA, which supposedly had recruited a mercenary force of white irregulars. Jonas Savimbi took both South African and CIA money as he and his rag tag UNITA troops latched on to the disciplined apartheid army."

"Simultaneously, the FNLA, another rival "independence" group led by Holden Roberto, another well paid CIA agent, hit Angola from Zaire in the North - with help from the Zairean government. Both armies advanced rapidly on Angola's capital, and experts were taking bets on how many days it

would take them to defeat the fragile and inexperienced armed forces of the MPLA. In a 1977 interview, Castro explained in great detail how MPLA President Agostino Neto had telephoned him and asked him to send troops in order to save Angolan independence. Castro claimed that he had favored the idea and discussed it with top Politburo comrades, who also assented."

"But, asked Castro rhetorically, how would we get our troops to Angola rapidly, since there was no time to send them by sea? Castro said that he phoned Jamaican Prime Minister Michael Manley, who also backed the idea of sending troops to help stave off a South African takeover of Angola, but that Jamaica being only 80 miles from Cuba offered little logistical help. Together, they had come up with the idea of asking Guyana's Prime Minister Forbes Burnham for permission to refuel Cuban troop transport aircraft in his capital. Burnham, who had enjoyed CIA ties himself at one time, surprisingly agreed and within less than a week. Manley confirmed this conversation to me."

"It would have been difficult at that time, Gleijeses concludes in discussing the pusillanimous role of the media in covering - or not covering - the war in Angola, for even an avid newspaper reader to know that "without the Cuban intervention, the South Africans would have seized Luanda [Angola's capital] before anyone reported that they [South Africans] had crossed the border. The CIA covert operation in Angola would have succeeded."

"When it failed Kissinger went ballistic. What right, Kissinger must have ranted, did a puny island nation like Cuba have to play a role in world history! A country lacking serious resources (oil, uranium, diamonds) and without a developed industrial base! Kissinger, we now know, took extreme umbrage over the fact that Fidel Castro, an upstart third world revolutionary, had dared to interfere in the Cold War, a world sized game played between major nuclear powers. Only great powers make history, he had told a former UN official."

"Castro's decision to intervene in Angola rather than pursue détente with the United States both angered and baffled Kissinger. According to Gleijeses, Kissinger had earlier chosen "Angola as the place to show America's resolve in the wake of Vietnam. In Angola, he would take the offensive; he would send a signal." Kissinger was looking for ways to assure allies and enemies alike that Washington possessed the resolve to respond to communist aggression and he had defined Moscow's tepid attitude toward the MPLA as a major anti-western initiative."

"Washington, as Gleijeses demonstrates by citing hundreds of newly declassified cables from CIA

and State Department officials, often had poor information on which to make decisions and when high officials did have accurate facts, they frequently ignored them in order to pursue their ideological bents. [Does that sound familiar?] Kissinger, the supreme ideologue and expert at ignoring evidence, was already annoyed over Castro's opting for intervention in Angola rather than détente with Washington. He must have felt absolutely beside himself when the CIA informed him later that fall that Cubans and Angolans had kicked the butt of the white South African forces that had surreptitiously invaded Angola."

"The CIA's covert action plans had failed on both fronts. The white South Africans until then had wrapped themselves in an invincible aura. In a series of battles in southern Angola, they took heavy casualties and learned some humility. Third world armies of color, it turned out, could stand up to white first world armies. Gleijeses reveals details about the thousands of Cubans - including women - who also volunteered for missions in places like Guinea Bissau where they played a decisive role in the liberation army's defeat of the Portuguese."

*"Although some prior narratives existed of these affairs, Gleijeses is the first historian to cite the actual cables and memos of state, from Washington and Havana - and from other countries as well - to provide insight into the decision making process itself. In addition, his quotes from the historical actors offer a unique texture to the book and enrich the narrative. Two sources are glaringly absent from Gleijeses' references, but through no fault of his. Sadly, neither Fidel nor Raul Castro granted the historian an interview. But even without those two crucial primary actors, *Conflicting Missions* stands out as an intensely researched and reasonably argued work that illuminates what had been an obscure tunnel of Cold War history."*

"Beyond the intrinsic policy and Africa analysis and arguments, the book also suggests a broader theme, one that helps to define the elusive dynamic of the Cuban revolution. When the revolutionaries took power in 1959, Cuba emerged from its role as an informal colony of the United States, a kind of appendage to the US economy, and within a few years began to play role in world history."

*"As *Conflicting Missions* makes clear, the Cuban revolution sent its soldiers to do their dance on the African part of history's stage. Cuba's artists, athletes and scientists had already made world reputations, but Cuba's soldiers in Africa were dying and getting wounded in order to shape the destiny of other peoples."*

"Perhaps this is the part of the Cuban revolution that has eluded US understanding, that Fidel Castro led a project to turn a demoralized informal US colony into a proud nation. Obviously, Cubans have paid a heavy price for this national achievement - divided families, political prisoners, the four decade long strain of hostile relations with the United States -- but what historical process doesn't exact a heavy toll?"

"Gleijeses study ends in 1976. Thanks to Cuba's effort, Angola won its independence. But a decade later, Cuban troops again play the key role in the second defeat of South Africa's military in the 1987-88 battles of Cuito Cuanavale -- battles that eventually led to the apartheid government's decision to abandon a military strategy and negotiate with the African National Congress."

"I remember watching Nelson Mandela's inauguration as South Africa's first black president and him shaking the hands of heads of state until he came to Fidel. Mandela grabbed the Cuban President in a bear hug and whispered, audibly, "You made this possible."

Mervyn

15 December 2008