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U.S. Reasserts Embargo Policy After U.S. Baseball Team Plays in Havana

by LADB Staff

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The Baltimore Orioles and a Cuban national team played an exhibition baseball game in Havana March 28. The game won by the Orioles 3-2 in 11 innings was part of the cultural- exchange program espoused by President Bill Clinton's administration. The second game of the exhibition series is scheduled for May 3 in Baltimore. The immediate effect of the game was to accentuate the already polarized views on US Cuban policy.

The administration repeatedly denied the series would lead to improved relations with Cuba and reasserted standing policy. Anti-Castro politicians in the US protested the two-game series and sought to force Clinton to cancel it. Rep. Bob Menendez (D-NJ) wrote to Clinton and the Orioles players denouncing the games. The letter said, in part, "At a time when Castro has announced a new law authorizing extensive jail terms for internal dissent and when Castro's kangaroo court has just sentenced Cuba's leading human rights activists to prison terms...it is not time to play with Cuba."

The exile group Hermanos al Rescate planned to drop propaganda leaflets over Havana on the day of the game but the flight was stopped by a Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) inspector, according to the group's leader, Jose Basulto. One exile interviewed on Miami television said, "This is like a nightmare for us...the Hitler of the Caribbean playing baseball." Ninoska Perez, spokeswoman for the Cuban American National Foundation (CANF) called the game "a reward for Castro."

As March 28 approached, the US House of Representatives held hearings on Cuba. Michael Ranneberger, State Department coordinator for Cuban affairs, told a subcommittee of the House International Relations Committee that the games were necessary for the democratization process in Cuba. At the same hearings, CANF official Jorge Mas asked the panel to have the games canceled. Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL), a member of the subcommittee, said the games were part of "an anti-democratic festival that the Clinton administration is putting on in honor of Castro." The media quickly dubbed the games "baseball diplomacy." This was a reference to the ping-pong games between Chinese and US players that were part of the thaw in Sino-US relations under president Richard Nixon in the 1970s.

Anti-Castro exile leaders in the US have interpreted the baseball series as part of a similar Clinton strategy to relax or lift the embargo against Cuba. However, a White House official said it would be "a major misconception to call this baseball diplomacy. It's people-to-people contacts, pretty simply." While the administration denied it was playing baseball diplomacy, government documents publicized in late March showed that the State Department contemplated just such diplomacy in the 1970s following the success of ping-pong diplomacy.

The private National Securities Archive published declassified State Department documents showing then baseball commissioner Bowie Kuhn held talks with high-level State Department officials who thought sports diplomacy would help normalize relations with Cuba. At one point Secretary of State Henry Kissinger showed interest in the plan but vetoed it when Cuban troops were sent to Angola. In all the disputes over whether such exchanges help Castro or help US anti-Castro policy, there was little discussion of the basic assumptions about whether people-to-people contacts achieve any policy objectives.

A New York Times editorial pointed out that "sports diplomacy has produced dramatic breakthroughs only when the governments using it were looking for one." Unlike the Chinese example, the current administration, "wary of alienating right-wing Cubans and their supporters," was not interested in taking other steps to normalize relations, said the editorial. In his remarks to the House subcommittee, Ranneberger mentioned baseball only in passing and went on to review in detail the history of Clinton's support of the embargo policy.

Clinton's Jan. 5 adjustments to the policy (see NotiCen, 1999-01-07), which included sports exchanges, are "not about normalizing government-to-government relations," he said. "They are about helping the Cuban people in their plight today and helping them prepare for a better tomorrow." He emphasized that improved relations depend on "systematic change in Cuba," which the US hopes to bring about by embargo pressure. A key element in the policy is convincing Cubans they can play a role in a democratic Cuba "if they help bring that about." Backing up that promise, he reminded the House panel of Clinton's 1997 proposal (Support for a Democratic Transition in Cuba) to fund a democratic transition government with up to US\$8 billion in loans and grants over a six-year period.

Cuban officials welcome sports diplomacy

While the US denied the baseball games would lead to better relations with Cuba, some Cuban officials were slightly more optimistic. Ricardo Alarcon, president of the Cuban National Assembly, said he was sure something like what happened in Sino-US relations would happen in Cuba, but "I don't know when."

Alarcon said the baseball games could bring the two peoples closer together but could, only with difficulty, improve relations between the two governments. The first game was "an example of what can happen between peoples when they act on the basis of the strictest respect for sovereignty of both nations," Alarcon said. "I am sure that when the US discovers how many countries Cuba has bilateral relations with, US policy will change as happened with the Republic of China in the time of Kissinger."

Games highlight complexities in bilateral relations

The sports exchange underscored some of the complexities in current Cuban-US relations. Clinton's approval of the games was aimed at providing people-to-people exchanges, but the travel ban that prevents US people from attending such events was not lifted. From the Cuban side, Castro restricted access to the stadium by the people of Cuba, issuing tickets to select groups through government-controlled schools, unions, and the Communist Party. Since the exchanges were part of a package of measures billed as a tactic to separate the Cuban people from their government,

Cuban officials were put on the defensive, afraid not to take part because of what world opinion might say, but unwilling to cooperate with a hostile policy. A Miami Herald report said a Cuban official told foreign journalists it was possible Clinton's approval of cultural exchanges, increased flights to Cuba, and other measures in the January announcement triggered the adoption of new laws cracking down on dissent and the trial of four prominent dissidents (see NotiCen, 1999-03-11, 1999-03-18).

Ranneberger and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright have subsequently said the crackdown shows the need for baseball games and other exchanges with Cuba. A State Department spokesperson said the people-to-people exchanges would bring in "a flow of information" that would undermine the Castro regime. The official also suggested that sports would expose Cubans to "democratic values," but did not explain why Cuba's elaborate sports programs have not already launched those values.

At the same time, a prominent anti-Castro opponent of the games argued that the "flow of information" carried out of Cuba by hundreds of journalists covering the game "will make this a media circus at a time when Cuba is violating every human right known to man."

One outcome the Clinton administration may not have anticipated was the exposure to Cuba by journalists and other visitors who do not normally focus on Cuban-US relations. Among many others, the Havana game introduced US sports reporters to political analysis. Several commented on the "crumbling" buildings and ancient cars as proof of Cuba's economic folly.

Others called for lifting the embargo to ease the plight of the Cuban people. Michael Leahy, sports columnist for the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette likened the baseball game to the collapse of the Berlin Wall. "Sunday meant nothing less than this: Someday, in the next century, after Fidel Castro is gone and a measure of political openness returns there, Havana will have a major-league franchise." (Sources: Associated Press, The New York Times, 03/25/99; The Miami Herald, 03/22/99, 03/28/99; Notimex, 03/24/99, 03/28/99, 03/29/99; Reuters, 03/28/99, 03/29/99; The Los Angeles Times, 03/23/99, 03/27/99, 03/29/99, 03/30/99; Agence France-Presse, The Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, 03/31/99)

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