

## PRESIDENT CARTER ON NORMALIZING RELATIONS WITH CUBA

An Interview with President Jimmy Carter, Atlanta, GA, July 23, 2004, 10:35-11:20

President Jimmy Carter

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After introductions, Peter Kornbluh briefly described the book project on the history of back-channel negotiations between the United States and Cuba.

**Kornbluh:** We are particularly struck by the fact that you were the one president who came into office and almost immediately issued a directive to actually work toward the normalization of relations with Cuba. Our first question is, how did you come to this decision so quickly? What is the genesis of this decision? What was your motivation?

**President Carter:** Well, in generic terms, when I was elected president I was determined to work for peace and the resolution of problems that the United States has had with other countries. There were three or four major points on my agenda. One was in Rhodesia, to see Rhodesia give up its apartheid regime. Another one was to try to work for a Middle East peace concerning Israel and Egypt since they had been at war four times in the previous 25 years. Another one was to deal with the longstanding need to normalize relations with China because we had had a divergence since President Nixon went there in 1972. He had announced there was only one China, but he never would say which one. And his successor rejected, in effect, any move toward normalized relations with China.

The fourth one that I recall, just off-hand, was the Panama Canal Treaty, which had been promised by three previous presidents but because of opposition in Congress had been abandoned. And the other one was Cuba. And, of course, over all of that was the Cold War, the relationship with the Soviet Union. And in some of those areas, the Soviets were deeply, even though indirectly, involved. Cuba was one, obviously. What we did with China was very sensitive in Moscow as well.

So, Cuba was one of the list of things. It wasn't at the top of my agenda. But I felt that it was time for us to have completely normal relations with Cuba. And I felt then, as I do now, that the best way to bring about a change in its Communist regime was to have open trade and commerce, and visitation, and diplomatic relations with Cuba. I spent a lot of time studying all those issues,

including Cuba, trying to understand the arguments of it. I had visited Cuba on a pleasure trip about a year before, six months before, Castro was successful with his coup attempt. We just had a few days, but I remember, I think, Batista's palace was surrounded by sandbags and troops and we were wondering why, and heard about this strange lawyer that was in the hills. But I didn't know much about it.

Anyway, I was really hopeful when I became president that we *could* have normal relations with Cuba. So, I immediately eliminated any restraint on travel, which I could do unilaterally, and opened up indirect communications with Castro to let him know through normal means my offer to move toward full diplomatic relations. And Castro responded, I would say, with some degree of approval of that. So eventually we got to a point that Castro agreed to release all his political prisoners, I think if I remember correctly 3,000. So, I worked very closely with my Attorney General then, Griffin Bell, and we would send a delegation down there and, I think, 125 at a time would be designated by Castro and they would be interviewed by us, and some wanted to stay in Cuba, some wanted to come to the United States. We would bring them up here an airplane load at a time.

**LeoGrande:** Can you say a little bit about how you thought about Angola?

**President Carter:** Well, I was going to get to that. We had an additional interest in Africa. Angola was a festering problem, and I felt that this was an area that needed to be addressed. The Austrians, I believe, if I remember correctly, we were [unintelligible] to Angola but we wanted to help in Angola as well as Rhodesia and later Ethiopia, which was ruled by a Communist dictator named Mengistu, as you know. And I felt that Cuba, which claimed to be a nonaligned entity, was playing an unwarranted role in promoting elements in, and training elements in, Angola that were working against an overall peace agreement [referring to the invasion of Shaba, Zaire from Angola by Katangan rebels]. To repeat myself, it wasn't at the top of my agenda, it wasn't the thing that I studied everyday, but I received reports from the CIA, and the National Security Adviser, and the State Department and I would make decisions based on the reports that I received. My reports were that Cuba was playing a role with the Katangan revolutionaries and so forth and training them. So I urged, I think I urged or demanded, that Castro refrain. He denied any involvement in Angola of a detrimental character.

Angola was not the turning point. The turning point for me, if I remember clearly, was in Ethiopia. There was a big battle going on between Somalia and Ethiopia in the Ogaden area in the eastern part of Ethiopia and there was no doubt in my mind that Russia and Cuba were deeply involved in Ethiopia. I remember one session that I had with Gromyko in the Cabinet Room when I had received information from Stansfield Turner, who was in charge of all intelligence agencies in the United States then—very similar to what was recommended yesterday by the 9/11 Commission. I had that when I was president. We had actual transcripts of radio conversations dealing with the fact of Cuban troops and Russian troops in Ethiopia. And I remember that Gromyko sat across the table from me and denied that. He knew he was lying, and he knew that I knew he was lying, but he was giving me the Communist line: we don't have any relationship with Mengistu. And I would say that, to some degree, Zbig Brzezinski was more concerned about Ethiopia and Mengistu's role, and the Soviet-Cuban presence in east Africa, in the Horn of

Africa, than maybe most of the rest of the government.

**Kornbluh:** More than yourself?

**President Carter:** I generally relied on Brzezinski. As I wrote in my book, *Keeping Faith*, the State Department was like a big anchor, a noose around my neck. If I ever got one innovative idea from the State Department in four years I don't recall it. Brzezinski was full of ideas. I met with him every morning and he would have maybe ten ideas, eight of which didn't prove to be advisable or feasible, but the other two were stimulating. Really, Brzezinski was and is my most intimate friend in the administration and I still trust him a lot. In fact, he's just been helping me today and yesterday on my speech to the Democratic convention Monday night.

Brzezinski was more concerned about the Soviet threat than maybe the State Department was. I felt that this was a test case for Castro, and I let Castro know very firmly that his involvement in Ethiopia and earlier Angola— but Angola was secondary in my memory— was a test case of whether we should proceed with normalization. And so the sum total of it, in the totality of my administration, we finally had to settle just for the opening of the Interest Sections, which I'm thankful have been retained open even through the Reagan and Bush years— and still are there at least as an opening.

I was frustrated in my original hopes that we could have full diplomatic relations with Cuba. All the way through, though, I have felt, since I left the White House, that we should not succumb to the pressures from the Cuban Americans in Miami and to some—I won't use specific names— in Congress to use the Cuba thing as a football, a political football. I think that now, at this moment, the best way to address the Cuban issue in its totality would be to remove the embargo and also remove the travel restraints.

**Kornbluh:** We've been very interested in the back channel, secret intermediaries work that went on and there were a variety of levels during your administration, official and open, and very quiet talks.

**President Carter:** There were Bob Pastor and Peter Tarnoff, I remember...

**Kornbluh:** You actually sent a note to Fidel Castro in early 1978 through a friend of yours, Paul Austin.

**President Carter:** Well, Paul Austin was not necessarily a friend of mine, but he was the CEO of Coca-Cola Co. and Coca-Cola Co. at that time had an interest, I would say a favorable attitude toward normalizing relations with Cuba, so I asked Paul to go down as my emissary, yes.

**Kornbluh:** This is actually the letter that you sent to Castro [handing President Carter the note].

**President Carter:** It turned out, to my surprise, that Paul was not qualified to go. At that time Paul was having the early stages of Alzheimer's, and I didn't know that. But he was still the executive officer [of Coca-Cola].

**Kornbluh:** We're just curious to know what the message was that he carried for you and what his talks with President Castro were about on your behalf.

**President Carter:** I would really have to go back and review exactly what the status of Cuba's presence was in Ethiopia was at that time, if this precedes it or was subsequent.

**LeoGrande:** It was subsequent, because this [letter] is February 1978. They started going into Ethiopia mid-December '77, and it was at its worst in January-February '78.

**President Carter:** I'm confused about the sequences. But the emissaries, Bob Pastor and Peter Tarnoff— both of them wonderful men— their mission was fruitless [referring to a December 1978 trip they made to meet with Fidel Castro in Havana]. It was a frustrated mission. I felt that this would be a good way for me to have a direct assessment of what Castro's commitment was. In effect, his opening up full diplomatic relations with the United States, I felt, would be a divisive factor between him and the Soviet Union. And the Soviet Union was his benefactor. Their contributions to Cuba then were about as much as our contributions are to Israel now. I think they were giving 7-8 million dollars a day to Cuba in total benefits, paying him three times what sugar was worth and selling him oil for five dollars a barrel and so forth. It was a lot of benefits.

So it was very difficult for Castro to depart from the request that Brezhnev was making. And I felt then— and I think Brzezinski would be a good one for you to talk to— that Brezhnev was wanting Castro to maintain a presence, primarily with black Cuban troops, in Ethiopia. And I wanted to let Castro decide once and for all: do you want to normalize relations with the United States or not. And that was the basic message that I wanted to send through a nongovernmental emissary that I thought Castro would honor.

**Kornbluh:** Do you remember what his [Austin's] report back to you was?

**President Carter:** It was somewhat confusing. I'm a little bit hesitant to talk to you about this, but when Paul Austin came to the White House Oval Office to make a report to me— and Brzezinski was there with me— we were a little bit concerned at the incoherence of his report. And I found out subsequently to my surprise that Paul was already suspected of having some early stages of Alzheimer's and that his intimates in Atlanta knew about it. The revelation would have been very damaging to Coca-Cola. Shortly after that Paul Austin was replaced. So that was just a footnote in history that caused me to be concerned about his response. But the fact is that Castro's decision was that I'm going to keep my troops in Ethiopia. And I looked upon that as Castro's basic decision that he was not going to endanger in any way his relationship with the Soviet Union.

**LeoGrande:** Was he [Brzezinski] skeptical about the normalization with Cuba from the beginning?

**President Carter:** No. No. Zbig and I became friends early on when I had just left the governorship, maybe a little bit before. He was executive director of the Trilateral Commission,

and I was one of the two governors that was taken in to the Trilateral Commission. At that time people didn't know I was planning to be president, but I felt the need to know more about international affairs. No one that was a member of that commission was a more avid student on the learning end than I. I studied all the papers and I worked with him. Brzezinski was a bright and evocative person, so I enjoyed talking with Zbig. But before my inauguration and after my election I made a speech, I think at the Woodrow Wilson Institute, at least we used their chambers, and I outlined the basic goals that I would have in foreign policy, and I don't recall any disparity between my goals and Brzezinski. In fact, he and I worked on them. They were fairly ambitious, if you think back to the four or five I outlined to you at the beginning of our conversation. Those are ambitious, and provocative and very difficult things: peace in the Middle East, normalized relations with China, dealing with Panama Canal Treaties, and so forth. Those were very controversial.

**LeoGrande:** Was that a speech before inauguration?

**President Carter:** Yes, it was a speech before inauguration. I think Howard Baker, who was minority leader in the Senate, I believe he was one of the ones who was there.

**Kornbluh:** The folklore is that the State Department was much more activist in trying to improve relations with Cuba and that it was Brzezinski that put the brakes....

**President Carter:** If the State Department was activist on anything I don't recall it. And this is not a new opinion of mine. The State Department was there and they were a very great source for information because of their access through their ambassadors, but never innovative, never aggressive, never provocative. Most of the time, we had ideas that I wanted to do, they knew all the reasons why we shouldn't do it. They were protecting their turf. I had two very fine Secretaries of State, but more than any other Secretary of State that I've know, Cy Vance was committed to the State Department. He felt that he had inherited the mantle of Thomas Jefferson as Secretary of State, rather than serving me as president and carrying out my policies. He was very consistent. He offered to resign three times before he finally did resign. So there was some difference between me and the State Department. So you can see that my feelings toward the State Department are not positive.

**LeoGrande:** I'd like to ask one last question before we ask you a little about your trip to Cuba. Was there anything in retrospect you think that we, the United States, might have done during your administration that would have made the Cuba situation come out differently?

**President Carter:** [leaning forward]: Well, I think now that I overreacted, maybe based on incorrect intelligence, in Angola. I think that Castro's assurances to me about his limited role in Angola were probably more truthful than I thought at the time. I think his role there was minimal, and I thought it was much greater. It may be that we overemphasized the need for Cuba to make a dramatic break with the Soviet Union in Ethiopia. I think in retrospect, knowing what I know since I left the White House, that I should have gone ahead and been more flexible in dealing with Cuba and established full diplomatic relations.

**LeoGrande:** Right at the very beginning, all at once?

**President Carter:** Even after '78. And I think had we done that, it could have prevented the Mariel boatlift. I think Castro, when he saw matters deteriorating— and I'm surmising now— but I think Castro saw my confrontation with him both publicly and privately on Ethiopia as a turning point also. I think he kind of gave up, as did I, on the immediate prospect of full normal relations. So both of us kind of backed away from that. And his later opening up Mariel and our tightening up again on the relationships was step backward. I could have been more flexible. And I think that subsequent events would have been better. I think had we done that there is a possibility— I don't have a firm belief on this— that Cuba would now be much more democratic than it is.

**Kornbluh:** What was your impression of Fidel Castro when you finally met him after all those years.

**President Carter:** I met him earlier; I met him when Carlos Andres Perez was inaugurated. I went down to attend that ceremony, and I met Castro then. He and I had a private conversation. I met Castro again at the Prime Minister's funeral in Canada, Trudeau's. Castro and I were the two so-called heads of state and we had a long wait before Trudeau's funeral procession began. Since he was still a head of state and I was a former head of state, we were in the line ahead of all the foreign ministers and ambassadors and others who were officially inferior to us in protocol. So we were there in the front and we had a long talk. I outlined the health programs that the Carter Center has around the world, and he outlined the health programs Cuba has around the world, and we agreed that we would sometime in the future share ideas. So that really planted in my mind an idea of an actual visit to Cuba.

But when I met with Castro, I found him to be surprisingly gracious. We had a tough negotiation with staff members about my access to the Cuban public. And I laid down some very stringent requirements— and he wanted me to come down. If I go down, I demand to have unlimited travel opportunities to meet with any of your leaders and any of the opposition that I choose. And to be able to speak as I please to the public media and then I wanted to have time on the television. And they finally agreed. Later I found out they had me scheduled at 3:00 in the afternoon to speak on television. This is after I had decided to go. Then I demanded that it be later in the evening when people would be watching TV. And then I discovered later that they had excluded radio— just TV. As I was riding in from the airport to the downtown hotel with Fidel, I told him that I was a little bit disturbed about not being to be on radio and he said well, we'll include radio, too. And later, to my surprise— I never mentioned it-- they printed the entire text of my speech, and also the questions and answers, some of which were very deleterious to Castro, in *Granma*. It took the whole paper. And the day after that, as we traveled around in Cuba, it was amazing how many people had a copy of that in their hand or in their pocket. So that was one thing that he did that I thought was very nice.

Another one was that he got word that I didn't like to stay up late. And Castro's normal operating procedure is, even when Congressmen go down there or people like you writing a biography or something, he won't give them an appointment in advance and he might have somebody call you

at 11:00 at night and say if you'll be available at 7:00, I'll meet with you. When I was talking to him it would always start early in the afternoon or evening and he would look at his watch constantly and he would always make sure I left the meeting in time to get back to my hotel by midnight. And he told my staff that he realized that he sometimes was inclined to dominate the conversation, and that if I ever wanted to speak to just indicate it. So, I had a habit, if he was going through a long dissertation about his philosophy and so forth, if I just raised my hand like that [gestures simply lifting his hand with palm outward in a discrete stop signal] he would immediately stop, in the middle of sentence sometimes, to let me give my point of view.

He put on a very gratifying and ostentatious entertainment for us. It was the finest entertainment that Cuba has to offer. And the finest food and the most beautiful arrangements. One night I remember, to my surprise, my second son Chip was in charge of the friendship force and there was a group of about 30 friendship members there. Castro found out about it and at the enormous state banquet they had that night he invited all this group of 30 Americans to come as his personal guests. And after he very carefully got me back to the hotel by midnight, he stayed up for several hours after that flirting with the friendship force women and talking to them, and so forth. He went out of his way to be gracious to us.

He had a voluminous record of all the correspondence and documents that he and I had exchanged, right behind him on the table. If a question came up, he would turn to a brilliant young man and he would go out and come back in and give Castro a copy. I'm sure he had all the papers you have accumulated.

He couldn't have been nicer to us.

**Kornbluh:** Can you put your visit and the motivations for your visit in the context of the overall difficulties of U.S.-Cuban relations now and what you had hoped to accomplish by this rather dramatic visit?

**President Carter:** Well, obviously, I didn't have any dreams that my visit would change the policies in Washington, in the Foreign Relations Committee or in the White House. The House and the Senate had both already voted in a majority to ease travel restrictions, to lift them and to ease the embargo restrictions, and the only thing preventing that was Bush's threat of a veto. And that circumstance still exists. So, I had support from a majority of the House and Senate. And we had some conferences here at the Carter Center as well. So I was hoping that I could demonstrate to America primarily that the situation in Cuba was not hopeless. And my main means for that was to give an unadorned and uncensored speech directed to the Cuban people. And I ran down Castro's departure from his own constitutional provisions on human rights and freedoms, freedom of assembly, freedom of speech—I did that very blatantly—and gave Castro credit for remarkable achievements in education and health, primarily. It was a balanced speech, I'm sure you've seen it.

**LeoGrande:** Had you told Castro in advance that you were going to talk about the Varela Project?

**President Carter:** No.

**LeoGrande:** How did he react to that subsequently.

**President Carter:** He never mentioned it to me subsequently. But I talked to his foreign minister and I talked to the speaker of the assembly all about it. They assured me that it would be received, but they never carried out that process adequately. They did receive it, but they claimed that it involved only changes in the constitution, which were not subject to the constitutional provision of a petition. But the Varela project leaders, as you know, say it does alter an encompassing law, so they used a legal technicality to prevent its adequate consideration.

We had full access to Cuba's scientific capabilities in developing new medicine. They went into some detail, his top scientists did, on what they had and had not done, and what the United States embargo meant in hurting the people of Cuba, and some of their achievements. They gave us a detailed run down on Cuba's presence in the Third World. I think they had at that time 2700 trained Cuban doctors stationed all around the world in different places. Since then, we've been in touch with many of those doctors, they've cooperated with us in some ways. They're playing a major role in Venezuela now, which is one of the primary concerns of the Carter Center.

They've helped to increase dramatically Venezuela's cooperation in eradicating river blindness. So, although I haven't personally been back to Cuba, Dr. Hardeman has, representing me and Jennifer McCoy representing me, and they could be available for follow-up.

**President Carter:** Maybe one other question....

**Kornbluh:** Now, the Cold War is over, Cuba is not in Africa. What should U.S. policy be now?

**President Carter:** I think immediately to lift all travel restrictions and all of the economic embargo against Cuba. I think that some of the leading politicians who may make decisions in the future basically agree with those premises that are also approved by a majority of the House and Senate. I think that ought to be implemented immediately. And I think with that unrestricted influx of Cuban Americans, including their stipends to their relatives and so forth, and other Americans who are just tourists who want to go in, or scientists, or teachers, or politicians, or writers, or anything else.

I think that's the best way to alleviate the concerns between us and Cuba. It's obvious to me that there is no security threat from Cuba. The earlier efforts, I think genuinely, by Castro to convert governments in this Hemisphere to communism, I think that's a thing of the past. I think it did exist for awhile. And so I think that the best thing is for us to move as rapidly as we can to full normalized relations with Cuba as we have with China, which is a communist nation. There's no threat from Cuba.

It's a deprivation of America civil liberties. Why can't I go to Cuba whenever I want to? Why



can't I sell my peanuts to Cuba? Why can't American poultry producers sell their chickens in Cuba? Why can't my Sunday school class take an unrestricted visit to Cuba to visit other Baptists in that country? The mandates that President Bush is trying to not only enforce but to magnify, of restraints on American civil liberties is, I think, unconscionable.

There follows a brief presentation to President Carter of books authored by Kornbluh and LeoGrande before the interview concludes.

**Kornbluh:** On behalf of everybody we work on human rights issues in Latin America, we thank you for all the tremendous work you've done, both as president and since.

**LeoGrande:** Thank you very much.

**President Carter:** I appreciate the books.

**Kornbluh:** We appreciate your time. I wanted to tell you that I went to the paladar you ate at in Havana, "Miss Lilliam's Cocina" wasn't it? They now have a menu that says, "What President Carter ate." There's a whole list of everything you ordered. And then it says at the bottom— this is a great capitalist marketing technique—"Eat like a President." I have to say it was very persuasive, and I ordered about three quarters of what you had ordered, though I'm not sure I ate it all!