William M. LeoGrande & Peter Kornbluh

Back Channel to Cuba: The Hidden History of Negotiations between Washington and Havana. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014. 544 pp. (Cloth US\$35.00)

Back Channel to Cuba is a timely and important book on the evolution of U.S.-Cuban relations, a must-read for students of Latin American and U.S. foreign policy. William LeoGrande and Peter Kornbluh analyze both the public and the secret (back-channel) negotiations between the two Cold War antagonists, revealing a history that goes beyond the conventional account of mutual hostilities. Its wealth of primary sources conveys a compelling story of fifty years of secret negotiations involving every U.S. president since Dwight Eisenhower.

The authors point out that even at moments of intense hostility there have always been reasons and opportunities for dialogue—dialogues that were kept secret because of the political sensitivity of the negotiations. “Sometimes the very intensity of the conflict and the imminent threat of violent confrontation was the catalyst for communication” (p. 409). Creative methods offered U.S. foreign policy makers “credible deniability” in their back-channel dealings with Havana. To limit the risks of direct contacts the United States and Cuba used third parties as conduits for communication. The list of mediators includes Nobel Prize Laureate Gabriel García Márquez, lawyer and former Nuremberg prosecutor James Donovan, former President Jimmy Carter, and even journalist and New York socialite Lisa Howard.

In an important conclusion, given President Obama’s dramatic restoration of diplomatic relations, the book demonstrates that small successes do not necessarily lead to big ones. “Despite significant successes on narrow issues, the two sides have never been able to translate the momentum of these tertiary agreements into real progress toward normalization” (p. 411). According to LeoGrande and Kornbluh, the history of these negotiations shows that an incremental approach to improving relations could not work. The failure of the Carter administration to reestablish diplomatic relations is an important example. Carter and his foreign policy team designed a process of “measured and reciprocal steps” to reestablish ties, which eventually led to an exchange of diplomats between Cuba and the United States and interest sections staffed by Cuban and U.S. diplomats in each other’s capitals even though they had no formal diplomatic relations. This was widely hailed as the most significant improvement in Cuban-U.S. relations since Eisenhower. On the day that the interest section agreement was signed, Carter made clear that “a normal friendly relationship” was his ultimate goal. But his efforts were under-

mined by the intensification of the Cold War in Africa. Cuba's decision to intervene in Ethiopia in concert with the Soviet Union derailed the rapprochement.

Carter, who was interviewed for the book, freely acknowledged that he missed a historic opportunity. "I think in retrospect, knowing what I know since I left the White House, I should have gone ahead and been more flexible in dealing with Cuba and established full diplomatic relations" (p. 224). LeoGrande and Kornbluh argue that given the sensitivity of Cuban policy, any incremental approach was more than likely doomed to failure. First, the slowness of a measured approach is likely to get overtaken by events. Henry Kissinger's effort to establish a dialogue with Cuba was disrupted by the Angolan Crisis and Bill Clinton's "calibrated approach" was interrupted by the Brothers to the Rescue shoot-down (p. 224). Secondly, they contend that incremental approaches do not change the fundamental relationship and are easily reversible. "Ford lifted the embargo on trade with Cuba by subsidiaries of U.S. corporations in third countries, the Cuban Democracy Act re-imposed them. Carter lifted the travel ban to Cuba, Reagan re-imposed it" (p. 412). Finally, they argue that the incremental approach gives opportunities to the opponent of the policy to derail the process at every juncture. Since the United States has congressional elections every two years and presidential elections every four years, given the sensitivity of Cuba policy "it is easy for it to become fodder for electoral politics" (p. 413).

The Obama administration made a dramatic break with the past and moved quickly to reestablish relations with Cuba. This came after nearly eighteen months of secret negotiations between the two countries. It is almost as if Obama's Cuba policy team was following the playbook in *Back Channel to Cuba*, as they not only abandoned incrementalism but also dropped many of the demands of past U.S. administrations with regard to human rights and democratization that the Castros had repeatedly rejected.

This accessible, well-written book would make a fine addition to any class on U.S. foreign policy or inter-American relations. Moreover, its use of declassified government sources and interviews with policymakers from Jimmy Carter to Fidel Castro makes it an authoritative account of U.S.-Cuban relations for both scholars and students.

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