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Cuba, the Black Panther Party and the US Black Movement in the 1960s: Issues of Security

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Abstract *During the 1960s strong ties of mutual support developed between the Black Panther Party and the revolutionary government of Cuba. These relations were also, however, often difficult and problematic. This paper argues that the problem stemmed from factional struggles among Cuba's leadership. One faction, lead by Ernesto "Che" Guevara, urged support for all revolutionary movements, including the Black Panther Party. Another more moderate faction wished to downplay such support as means of avoiding US reprisals. Ultimately this faction prevailed, leaving Cuban support for the Black Panther Party more rhetorical than real. While several members of the Black Panther Party and other African American radicals were granted asylum in Cuba, their political activities were severely restricted. Among this group, then, disillusionment set in as to the revolutionary sincerity of the Cuban regime.*

During the decade of the 1960s, racial and class tensions exploded in the United States. Revolutionary Black leaders gained international recognition and notoriety as the pacifist civil rights leadership of the 1950s and early 1960s yielded to the proponents of Black Power and militant nationalism. The Vietnam conflict and its progeny, the Anti-War Movement, were heating up, anti-colonial guerilla warfare was being waged around the globe, and Cuba became a lightning rod for both conflict between geopolitical rivals—the US and the Soviet Union—and inspiration to those in struggle for radical change.

From the raucous inception of the regime, Cuban revolutionary leaders—Fidel Castro, Ernesto "Che" Guevara, and others—had an interest in exploring and then strengthening relations with the emerging militant leaders of the US Black Movement. Key players in forging this alliance were members of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. "The Black Panther Party was very present in the early years of relations with the Cuban Revolution," remembered Eldridge Cleaver, the Party's Minister of Information. "The Castro regime certainly believed there could be a US revolution. The Panthers believed we were the vanguard action group that would lead by setting examples. And the Cubans never argued with us about our vanguard role. There was no *time* for arguments."¹

Cuba was perceived as a natural ally by many within the burgeoning militant wing of the US Black Movement for a number of reasons: the revolution exemplified a successful eradication of "yanqui" imperialist control from an

¹ Eldridge Cleaver, interview with the author, Miami, FL (January 20 and February 11, 1996).

oppressed nation; Cuba bravely fought for the liberation from colonialism in Africa; the regime offered solidarity and support to both the civil rights leadership and urban revolutionaries; through its media, it internationally spotlighted racism in the US; the regime promised to train US militants in insurrectional tactics and weaponry; and it provided a haven for exiles. Perhaps most importantly for US Blacks, Cuba claimed to have purged the scourge of racism from its society.

Yet conflict and confusion shook the alliance. An important element in the deepening of these relations and the conflicts these ties engendered is the issue of security—both individual Black leaders' safety concerns as well as the broader, national security issues facing the Cuban regime. In the final analysis, a complex interplay of factors both drew these leaders together and at times drove them apart. The most critical factor in dictating the parameters for these relations was the struggle within the Cuban leadership for ideological dominance and for the power to set security policy.

Two opposing factions emerged, centered around Che Guevara's revolutionary vision and active promotion of armed insurrection at one extreme, and those who were part of the more conservative, pro-Moscow leadership of the pre-revolutionary Cuban Communist Party, called the Popular Socialist Party (PSP), at the other. This latter faction included PSP chief theoretician and lawyer Carlos Rafael Rodríguez, Secretary General Blás Roca, Director of Information Aníbal Escalante, Fidel's brother Raúl Castro, and the Minister of Interior under the Castro regime Ramiro Valdés. These men took a more cautious approach to the Black nationalists and toward security policy in general.

Cuba's growing economic and military dependence on the USSR severely impeded the ideological development and autonomy of the Cuban government in establishing foreign policy and strengthened the hand of the pro-Soviet faction. This in turn led to an increasingly tepid view throughout the 1960s of the radicalizing US Movement. Despite deviations in policy decisions and propaganda throughout the decade, a definite trend emerged toward an orthodox, Moscow-oriented ideology and national security position, antithetical to the original views of Guevara and Castro.

Guevara maintained his purist position and was thus forced from power by mid-decade, while Castro eventually either yielded to, in order to maintain power, or accepted the wisdom of the Soviet ideology and security dictates. This polarization into factions—with Castro taking up the middle ground only by passing through on his way to and from the extremes—made for erratic shifts in policy toward the US Movement.

Briefly, it will be argued that national security concerns placed limits on the solidarity and support that the Cubans were willing to provide, particularly as the pro-Moscow faction gained prominence around mid-decade. Relations with the US, or rather survival tactics in the face of a powerful and hostile neighbor, were the source of these concerns throughout the 1960s. Overt threats from the US military compounded with covert meddling and sabotage by the FBI and CIA added strain and an element of distrust to the relationship.

Intense debate within the regime centered around the best way to safeguard Cuba's national security: through active support for socialist revolution throughout the hemisphere (the Guevarist approach); or by closer ties with the Soviet Union and thus cooperating with agreements made between the superpowers

(the traditional Cuban Communist Party approach). At the root of this debate were fundamental differences in revolutionary ideals.

The shifts in power and thus policy toward the Black Movement effected the regime's willingness to grant asylum to US exiles. The Cubans had to perform a dangerous political balancing act between their national security and their sympathy for oppressed Blacks when making these decisions. The most notorious, and thus politically dangerous, exiles for the Cubans to harbor—namely, Eldridge Cleaver in 1968, Party founder and Minister of Defense Huey P. Newton in 1974, and East Coast Party activist Assata Shakur in 1979—came from the Black Panther Party. All were escaping arrest and imprisonment in the US and feared for their lives, and all were taken in by the Cubans. A forerunner of these fugitives was Robert Williams, who fled the US in 1961 for the island. The exile experiences of Williams and Cleaver during the decade of the 1960s will be examined below.

The nature of relations with the US Black Movement, then, depended on which faction was influencing Castro directly and which held positions of power with the ability to set policy independently. Throughout the decade, policy toward the US Movement was inconsistent and thus confusing for African Americans. A useful way to view these fluctuations is by examining the rise and decline of the influence of the two camps. By the second half of the decade, Castro was increasingly either seduced by or unable to halt the conservative pro-Moscow influence over security policy in Cuba.

Safeguarding Cuban national security—both economic stability as well as preventing or withstanding outside attack or internal counter-revolution—necessitated choosing one of the following: searching for rapprochement with the US, bargaining with the USSR and China for the best comprehensive security pledges which would still allow a degree of independence, or embarking on a totally new path. The two opposing camps, outlined below, clashed over the best route to take in order to protect the regime and ensure the viability of the revolution.

The Guevarist Faction

Based on his experience in Cuba, his travels in Latin America and his extensive theoretical studies, Guevara concluded that Cuba's national security would best be protected when all the nations of Latin America achieved economic and political independence. He therefore encouraged the forceful overthrow of the current capitalist and neocolonial governments throughout the hemisphere. A revolution in a country with a large economy, such as Venezuela, Argentina or Brazil, was desperately needed to ensure the survival of socialist Cuba, which was increasingly becoming isolated. This isolation was due mainly to direct and indirect maneuverings by the United States and to policies of the Castro government which antagonized the US and Cuba's former allies in Latin America and elsewhere.

Guevara made no distinction between the Third and the First World (namely, the United States) when supporting insurrection; Cuban security would be ensured by promoting revolution in every part of the world. Ultimately, his strict adherence to this security policy was the primary reason for his forced departure from power in Cuba.² Although the idea of a revolution in the US in

² For a full elaboration of this argument, see Ruth Reitan, "Issues of Security," in *The Rise and Decline of an Alliance: Cuba and African American Leaders in the 1960s* (East Lansing:

the early 1960s seemed remote, Guevara did not rule it out, and rather—at least theoretically—held it as a possibility as long as US Blacks united in violent protest and the working class mobilized in support.³ In Guevara's view, if revolution ought to be fueled anywhere it springs up, then flames of unrest in the "belly of the beast" should surely be fanned, since US intervention was Cuba's primary security concern.

It is reasonable to conclude that Castro also supported Guevara's approach to Cuban security policy. Being the consummate politician that he is, Castro seemed to cast Guevara (possibly with Che's initial approval) as a formidable "extremist." This gave Castro some maneuvering room with the Soviets and the pro-Moscow forces within the regime and allowed him to portray himself as the accommodationist among all parties involved. As US and Soviet pressure grew and constricted maneuvering space throughout the decade, Castro could then blame Guevara and his faction when violence failed and Che's (*not* Castro's) security policy yielded disappointing results. The death blow to this policy, and perhaps Castro's final step away from the Guevarist faction, was dealt in Che's failed insurrectional attempt and ultimate execution in Bolivia in 1967.

Guevara grew disenchanted with the USSR, as he came to understand that true international solidarity and support for insurrection did not figure heavily into the Soviets' perceived national interests. Particularly after the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, Guevara became more and more wary of yielding to Soviet advice. As his frustration mounted, however, the influence of Cuba's pro-Soviet Communists increased over security policy.

Traditional Communist Party Faction

The pro-Moscow faction followed the Soviet lead and largely deferred policy decisions about relations with the US and support for insurrectional struggles to the Kremlin. This was during the era of "peaceful coexistence" with the West, the Soviet view of the correct road to ensuring national security. Therefore, with regard to the US Movement, during the civil rights phase only general, verbal support was given to the pacifist leadership, since this stance would not threaten to jeopardize Soviet and Cuban attempts at rapprochement with Washington and could not be misconstrued as an attempt to meddle internally, which would surely risk retaliation.⁴

But late in the 1960s when groups such as the Black Panthers began advocating armed self-defense and insurrection, the traditional Communists recoiled. This emerging radical stage of the US Movement posed a much greater threat to the facade of "revolutionary internationalism" behind which the conservative leaders hid. Robert Williams, and later Eldridge Cleaver, discovered that the "Bourgeois Communists," as Williams branded them, benefited from maintaining revolutionary rhetoric and official support of insurrection. This official stance was necessary, lest their own people either demand truly

³ Ricardo Rojo, *My Friend Che* (New York: Grove Press (The Dial Press), 1968), p. 94.

⁴ Domingo Amuchastegui (formerly an official in the Cuban Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Intelligence, and the head of the Department of Organization *vis-à-vis* the Tricontinental organizations during the 1960s and 1970s), interview with the author, Miami, FL (March 23, 1995).

progressive leadership who would remain faithful to the precepts on which the revolution was based or call for a return to a consumerist society under which a decent standard of living could be afforded, since building the enlightened, socialist man would be exposed as having failed.⁵ Revolutionary slogans pervaded the official Cuban media, encouraging Third World insurgents to wage armed struggle during the middle and late 1960s. However, the pro-Soviet-dominated government tried hard to avoid acts that would in any way suggest to the US government that the regime sponsored violence on the part of the Black revolutionaries.⁶

Nevertheless, Fidel—in a state of defiant nostalgia or frustration against the increasingly bureaucratized and conservative government—would fire off revolutionary proclamations in support of US Black insurrection. The combination of the official radical propaganda and Castro's passionate pleas led many to believe that Cuba would still take risks to support the US Black revolution; but from the perspective of the traditional pro-Moscow faction to which Castro increasingly subscribed, national security issues took precedence over the rhetorical revolutionary posture in the regime's actual decision-making.

Two Divergent Policies Toward the US Movement

The Black Panther Party platform represented the closest ideological fit of any US militant organization with the Cuban rhetoric of class warfare and solidarity with the oppressed poor and people of color the world over. The Panthers were vocally supportive of the Cuban revolution, propagated a Marxist-Leninist ideology, and forged alliances with White progressives. Their 10-point program of "What We Want What We Believe" called for land redistribution, community control of resources and police, decent housing, proper education, freedom and self-determination. They opposed the Vietnam War as racist and pointed out the right of the people to end a government that has become destructive to the liberties of its citizens.⁷ It appeared as though Havana could not have asked for a more willing ally within the US Movement.

Yet upon closer observation, the view of the role that the Black revolutionaries could play within the growing Anti-War Movement, as well as the hoped-for outcome of the entire US struggle, was quite different between the two Cuban factions. The traditional Communists determined that the objective conditions in the US did not exist—nor could they be brought about by a small group of militants such as a vanguard Black Panther Party—to begin an insurrection. Therefore, since struggle based on ethnicity was seen as divisive and illegitimate, the best that the Black "proletariat" could do was be absorbed into the larger Anti-War and workers' struggle.⁸ In this way, the pro-Soviets hoped to force Washington's hand to not interfere in Cuban affairs.

The opposing belief was held by those within the regime who subscribed to

⁵ Robert Carl Cohen, *Black Crusader: A Biography of Robert Franklin Williams* (Secaucus, NJ: Lyle Stuart, 1972), p. 314.

⁶ Amuchastegui, interview.

⁷ The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, "The Black Panther," in John Bracey, Jr. et al. (eds), *Black Nationalism in America* (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970), pp. 526–27.

⁸ Amuchastegui, interview.

Guevara's guerrilla "foco" theory.⁹ The exile experiences of Williams and Cleaver revealed that the Guevarists were in fact hopeful that a Black vanguard would ignite the Anti-War Movement and push for radical change in the US. The most idealistic hope was that an insurrection could take hold in the US, led by the country's most oppressed people, the African Americans.¹⁰

The factional struggle to set security policy in the early years was evident throughout the many changes, challenges and upheavals faced by the new regime: in June 1959, five government ministers resigned. Castro temporarily distanced himself from Guevara, who was considered too far to the left, by sending Che on his first tour of Africa and Asia.¹¹ After Castro consolidated his power, Che was appointed head of the Ministry of Industry within the National Institute for Agrarian Reform (INRA) and, soon after, president of the National Bank of Cuba.¹² Another governmental shake up in early 1962 took place when hundreds of "Stalinist" Communist Party members were replaced in their government positions by "revolutionaries" from Castro's and Guevara's camp; two weeks later, the Soviet news organ *Pravda* finally acknowledged Cuba as a socialist country. In the aftermath of the 1962 Missile Crisis, pro-Moscow Party members again lost credibility within the regime, but by 1964, it was apparent that Guevara's 1961 four-year plan of industrialization was failing and thus a closer involvement with the Soviets would have to be pursued if the Cuban economy and revolution as a whole were to survive.¹³

Castro, caught in the middle of this factional debate, instinctually agreed with Guevara, yet he viewed the pro-Soviet path as the most pragmatic approach for resolving Cuba's immediate security crisis. "For Castro himself," asserted the author Carlos Moore, "the dependent relationship posed the problem of how Cuba could enjoy Soviet military protection and economic aid without becoming a mere Caribbean satellite of the USSR."¹⁴ Therefore, a compromise between the two camps was apparently reached around mid-decade, most likely brokered by Castro who was once again playing the role of accommodationist, bridging the two "extremes": the traditional Communist Party's approach to security would be adopted toward the US Movement, but the Guevarist approach would still be attempted in the Third World. This two-tiered policy of insurrectional support allowed for a revolutionary stance toward those countries from which the Cubans did not fear retaliation, and a more cautious approach toward the First World, namely, the US revolutionary movement.

The pro-Soviets had effectively defeated the Guevarist approach to security with regard to the US Movement by 1965, before the birth of the Black Panther Party and the surge of revolutionary elements within the US Black Movement. That year Che disappeared and could not push for a more militant policy toward the US. To seal the fate of the Guevarist faction, those closest to Che

⁹ This theory of struggle called for cells of guerrilla fighters based in the countryside practicing revolutionary insurrection and working among the masses.

¹⁰ Cleaver, interview; and Rojo, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

¹¹ Rojo, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 86.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

¹⁴ Carlos Moore, *Castro, the Blacks, and Africa* (Los Angeles: Center for Afro-American Studies, University of California, 1988), p. 4.

were either demoted, transferred to the provinces, or sent to Africa on international missions. But despite the triumph of pro-Soviet security policies, with respect to the US Movement, Cuba's official rhetoric did not change. Therefore, US Black nationalists did not learn of the change in policy and priorities until they came face to face with revisionism in exile.

Black Leaders' Personal Safety Concerns amid Fluctuating Cuban Security Policy

Throughout the 1960s every US Black leader was faced with issues of personal security. The FBI began its surveillance of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), its president Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Nation of Islam in the late 1950s; the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), a Southern civil rights group which was later taken in a more militant direction by "Black Power" leader Kwame Ture (formerly Stokely Carmichael), was targeted for surveillance in 1960.¹⁵ Efforts were stepped up in the first part of the 1960s against King, Malcolm X, Ture and the Black Panther Party and escalated throughout the decade.¹⁶ These leaders' cries against US racism and imperialism were met with intensified surveillance as well as harassment and death threats. The fear of government-sponsored harassment and murder deepened after the controversial assassinations of Malcolm X in 1965 and King in 1968.

The FBI expanded its counter-intelligence program (COINTELPRO) from surveillance and harassment of Communists to include a massive offensive throughout the 1960s to divide, infiltrate and essentially break the Black Movement. FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover described the Panthers, who became the main focus of the government assault, as posing "the greatest threat to the internal security of the country."¹⁷ The COINTELPRO tactics included spying, wiretapping, burglaries and infiltration in order to create disruption and paranoia within select radical groups. Other targeted organizations in addition to the Panthers included potential Arab terrorist groups, radical ethnic and student organizations and suspected Soviet espionage groups such as US Marxist parties.¹⁸

Racial violence wielded by private hate groups and individuals accompanied the official harassment. King's home was firebombed in 1956; Black churches were burned throughout the South; Blacks were fired from their jobs, evicted from their homes, and in many other ways terrorized so that they would not take up the cause of desegregation, let alone pick up a gun. In desperate reaction to this violence and repression, by 1967 cities throughout the country were ablaze with Black fury.

¹⁵ Ward Churchill, *The COINTELPRO Papers* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), pp. 95-96, 102-03.

¹⁶ See *ibid.*, pp. 105-230.

¹⁷ JoNina M. Abron, "The Legacy of the Black Panther Party," *The Black Scholar* (November-December 1968), p. 33.

¹⁸ Seymour M. Hersh, "Alien-Radical Tie Disputed by C.I.A.," *The New York Times* (25 May, 1973), p. 1.

Cuba as Haven for Exiles

Many Black fighters sought exile in Cuba in response to this climate of harassment, violence, and ongoing threats to personal security, at times at the invitation of Castro himself. The reality of desperate exiles seeking refuge in an allegedly revolutionary state threw into sharp relief the debate between the Guevarist and pro-Soviet camps over the best strategy for national security. The limits to Cuban solidarity were thus tested throughout the decade and beyond by such leaders as Williams and the Black Panther Party's Cleaver, Newton and Shakur, as well as other Black militants of all persuasions. In order to illustrate the erratic shifts in policy toward the US Black Movement springing from the conflict between the two camps over national security and ideology, two political exile experiences will be reviewed, one occurring early in the decade, the other at its close: those of Robert Williams and Eldridge Cleaver.

Robert Williams

Robert Williams, a Southern NAACP leader and also advocate of armed self-defense against White racial violence, was a radical leader of the early 1960s who inspired the Black Panther Party. He had been one of the first travelers to Cuba with the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, an organization established in the spring of 1960 to support the Castro-led revolution and to assist travel between the two countries.¹⁹ Williams was an outspoken opponent of the Bay of Pigs invasion and other hostility against Cuba and soon became a target of FBI aggression. In August 1961, the Bureau attempted to crush Williams' burgeoning self-defense organizations in North Carolina which had been arming themselves in the face of mounting racial attacks.

He fled to Cuba in October of that year after a violent clash among White racists, the police and the Freedom Riders, a direct action group organized by the interracial Congress of Racial Equality (CORE).²⁰ This clash led to an FBI warrant for Williams' arrest on fabricated kidnapping charges and interstate flight. At the personal invitation of Castro, Williams was able to enter Cuba.²¹ This escape led to the first highly publicized relationship between a US Black leader and the Cuban government.

Within months, Williams had established a network for bringing more Black activists to the island via Canada. He also began broadcasting the pro-Castro radio show "Radio Free Dixie," calling for a repeat of the Sierra Maestra insurrection to be mounted in the US South. He often spoke at public rallies with Castro as well as at private receptions for African delegations to the island.²² Initially, Cuba's political climate was favorable to Williams' brand of militancy since the Guevarist approach to security was still considered a viable option. At that time many within the regime, including Castro, were almost literally

¹⁹ Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

²⁰ CORE was the first group to directly challenge segregation laws and customs in interstate transportation in the South in May 1961. In John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), p. 627.

²¹ Cohen, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

²² Moore, *op. cit.*, pp. 121–22.

thumbing their noses at the US and had not yet accepted their role within the mounting East–West conflict.

Williams was most anxious to discuss the militant tactics outlined in his book *Theory of Urban Warfare* with his new comrades. In it, he asserted that the vanguard Black revolutionaries would carry out an urban guerrilla campaign. However, it was this plan that would soon lead him to discover the disparity between Cuban revolutionary rhetoric and the actual actions many were willing to take on behalf of US Black liberation; it was on this issue that he first clashed with pro-Soviet forces with regard to Cuban security.²³

As the Cuban political climate grew more conservative over the next few years, members of the increasingly pro-Soviet DGI²⁴ and the Communist Party became unwilling to entertain a public discussion of Williams' tactics, particularly given the fragility of US–Cuban relations following the Missile Crisis. When the leadership continually sought to dissuade his plans for a guerrilla "foco" in the US South, Williams grew frustrated.

"Radio Free Dixie" became another point of contention. According to Cuban official Domingo Amuchastegui, the extremist views that Williams broadcasted over Radio Havana could not be tolerated due to the risk of provoking US retaliation.²⁵ They also discouraged Williams from drawing international attention to racial tensions in the US and refused to strongly criticize the US government's racism.²⁶ The pro-Soviets saw this as both derisive to long term solidarity of the US working class and dangerous to Cuban security. With hindsight, it seems Williams would have fared better with the Cubans had he been a peasant in the Andes rather than an urban-dweller from the United States. To the pro-Moscow Cubans, the correct approach for the Third World was dangerous to attempt in the First World.

Nonetheless, in the early part of the decade Castro was very much in agreement with the Guevarist approach to national security and therefore eschewed the traditional Communists' advice and instead granted Williams additional assistance in broadcasting his program.²⁷ Fidel attempted to help him on a number of occasions when the Communist stalwarts were sabotaging his broadcasts or disrupting the printing of his newspaper, *The Crusader*.²⁸ Castro also offered assistance in publishing Williams' book, *Negroes With Guns*. But as the decade progressed, the pro-Soviets erected obstacles between Williams and his sympathizers within the upper echelon of the regime. One Communist Party–USA (CPUSA) advisor working in Cuban radio at the time informed Williams, "Just remember, Fidel is way up there at the top and you are way down here at the bottom; and there are a lot of us in between who can mess you up very badly without him ever hearing about it."²⁹ The "Bourgeois Communists" apparently worked in conjunction with the CPUSA to smear Williams and otherwise diminish his influence and reach throughout North America.

By early 1965 the general consensus within the regime was that

²³ Cohen, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

²⁴ The Cuban intelligence and security apparatus.

²⁵ Amuchastegui, interview.

²⁶ *Ibid.*; and Cohen, *op. cit.*, p. 208.

²⁷ Cohen, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 223–25.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 302.

Williams' anti-Washington inflammatory rhetoric was jeopardizing Cuba's security.³⁰ Williams came to suspect that certain members of the DGI and the government were actually working with US intelligence to get him thrown out of Cuba and returned to the US to face his criminal charges. Doing so would remove a major point of contention in US-Cuban relations and could potentially be a move toward a guarantee of Cuban territorial integrity.

In April of that year, Che confided to Williams that the Guevarist security and ideological position was nearly defeated in Cuba. Che vehemently stated his total disagreement with the direction in which the Communist Party was steering the country as well as with its conservative approach to the US Black Movement.³¹ Within weeks of that meeting, the Guevarists were permanently sealed from power, thus determining Williams' fate in Cuba as well. The following year, he was not invited to the first Tricontinental Conference held in Havana and organized by the Party for African, Asian and American "revolutionaries." He therefore concluded that "as long as Cuba's leaders believed the only way for their nation to survive was to avoid seriously irritating Washington, there was no hope of their giving anything but hollow words of support to the Black liberation movement in America."³² The revolutionary dynamic that Williams had fallen in love with at the dawn of the decade had been, in his mind, crippled by party elitism and the Cold War orientation toward national security.

As relations with the regime continued to deteriorate, Williams began to make plans for departing the island. He soon came to blows with the Cuban security forces. According to Cleaver, who spoke at length with Williams later in Tanzania, the "Bourgeois Communists" closed down Williams' radio program, forbade him from printing any more newsletters and were forcibly moving him out of his apartment. Shots were allegedly exchanged in anger between Williams and the police, but no one was killed.³³ Soon after, three officials loyal to Castro visited Williams and begged him to reconsider his plans to leave. They said they realized that the government had lost some of its pure revolutionary ideals, but that Fidel needed people like Williams to stay and fight for the soul of the revolution. These men maintained that the most serious problem within the leadership at the time was that Castro was increasingly isolated and misinformed by the pro-Moscow advisors around him.³⁴ Williams, however, knew that his battle lay elsewhere, in the liberation of his own people.

He had also lost faith in Castro's ability to effect radical change, particularly after the purging of Guevara's influence from the regime. Although Williams felt Castro's heart was with the armed struggle for liberation, he saw that what a man is willing to do as an individual and what he is *able* to do as Head of State were radically different. Williams concluded that Cuba's degradation into a bureaucratized state necessitated the isolation of its revolutionaries, like Che and Fidel, since the existence of charismatic personalities had always posed a threat to the bureaucrat.³⁵ Therefore, for Castro to survive as the leader

³⁰ Cleaver, interview; and Amuchastegui, interview.

³¹ Cohen, *op. cit.*, p. 292.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 314.

³³ Cleaver, interview.

³⁴ Cohen, *op. cit.*, p. 313.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 315.

of Cuba, he had been either convinced of, or forced to accept, the pro-Soviet security dictates.

On July 17, 1966, Williams left Cuba for China, a place for which he still harbored revolutionary hopes and from which he expected support for US Black liberation. He soon wrote a letter to Castro that was allegedly blocked from reaching him by Williams' enemies within Cuba; he therefore sent it as an open letter through press channels. In it he thanked Fidel for the Cubans' hospitality and pledged his support for the revolution, but said that he wanted to draw Castro's attention to certain revisionist leaders within the regime who posed a threat to the very survival of the Cuban revolution. He accused Major Manuel Piñeiro Losada (head of the DGI), René Vallejo (Castro's personal aide and physician) and Osmany Cienfuegos (Minister of Construction) of being thieves or worse.³⁶ This letter was Williams' final attempt to reach a leader he deemed increasingly isolated and misled into allowing reactionary policies to be implemented toward the US Black Movement due to misguided security concerns.

Eldridge Cleaver

As Williams' disappointed and frustration-filled departure from Cuba illustrated, security policy at the time of Cleaver's exile was largely under the control of the traditional Communist Party faction. However, these "Bourgeois Communists" could not afford to give up the revolutionary facade perpetuated by bold phrases of official international solidarity and support for insurrection due to the domestic security ramifications. Consequently, asylum was granted to the Black Panther leader in late 1968.

Due to the mounting assault from COINTELPRO to eliminate the Black Panthers, and more urgently his impending return to prison stemming from the April shootout with Oakland police, Cleaver secretly requested asylum in 1968 through a Cuban representative to the United Nations in New York. Cleaver asked for a special assurance from Castro himself that he would be received as a fugitive under Cleaver's own conditions.³⁷ Amuchastegui stated that after much debate on the issue of risking retaliation from the US, the Cuban regime conceded.³⁸ Cleaver then received word through the Cuban mission in New York that Fidel granted him "safe passage, security, and help." In addition, Castro acknowledged that Cleaver would be in charge of organizing the start up of a military training facility on an abandoned farm outside of Havana which the Cubans had promised the Black Panther Party some time earlier.³⁹

Cleaver and the Cubans agreed that his stay would be kept as discreet as possible. The Panther leader understood that if the US government found out that the Cubans were harboring militant fugitives, it would be a good excuse to accuse the regime of meddling in US internal affairs and thus attack the island either overtly or covertly. This was a deep concern for both parties involved and was discussed at length in the planning stages of Cleaver's flight into exile.⁴⁰

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 320.

³⁷ Cleaver, interview.

³⁸ Amuchastegui, interview.

³⁹ Cleaver, interview.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

Following an arduous escape, Cleaver arrived in Havana on Christmas morning, 1968.

But the initial relief of Cleaver's escape soon dissolved into ambivalence, frustration and disillusionment in exile, as he came face to face with the pro-Soviet-dominated regime. He was kept under close supervision by Major Piñeiro and Mr. Silva, who, when asked, dodged his questions of an exact date when the training facility could be opened and Panther Party members could begin coming to the island. In addition to these incessant delays in opening the facility, another major point of contention between Cleaver—along with the other exiled Black militants in general—and the Cuban government was the issue of the treatment of airplane hijackers.

"Air piracy," as it was officially branded, had become a chronic security threat for the Cuban leadership throughout the late 1960s and 1970s. From the onset the Cubans were trying to reach an accord with the United States over this issue,⁴¹ which they eventually achieved in 1973. The risks to the Cubans were enormous since they did not know if these planes were on a mission to attack the island (à la Bay of Pigs), CIA or FBI spies posing as US dissidents, or genuine fighters fleeing the US for political reasons.

There was justifiably some confusion and frustration for hijackers once they landed in Cuba: thinking they had reached freedom, they were instead greeted by security forces and jailed in the interim. The Cubans maintain, however, that this was standard and necessary procedure. They insist that the idea of Cuba as a welcoming haven for oppressed Black revolutionaries was correct to a point, but this welcome was never intended for those who resorted to air piracy as their means of transport.⁴²

Cleaver criticized the regime over this internment process of US hijackers as well the rumored inhumane treatment of imprisoned Cubans. The government in turn accused Cleaver of meddling in Cuba's internal affairs. Eventually his hosts admitted to Cleaver that they could not abide by their agreement to train the Black Panthers for two reasons. First, they had concluded that the Black Movement had become too infiltrated by FBI and CIA agents to the point where they didn't know who they could and could not trust. Training and arming the US Movement would pose a great threat to internal security due to the possibility of mistakenly arming undercover counter-revolutionaries and also threatened Cuba's national security due to the danger of US intelligence learning of their assistance and thus feeling justified to attack. The second reason they gave was, since Guevara's death, the policy of active assistance to liberation struggles had been discontinued. At the time, Cleaver took the Cubans at their word and believed that when they had initially promised the training facility to the Panthers a year prior, they had been genuine.⁴³ What seems most likely is that the Cuban representatives to the UN maintained a Guevarist approach to the US Movement longer than the majority of the leadership on the island did. Therefore, these representatives were still promising revolutionary support as late as 1967 or 1968 to Black militants in the US, even though this practice had been deemed insupportable by the bulk of the regime in Havana by mid-decade.

⁴¹ Amuchastegui, interview.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Cleaver, interview.

In fact, throughout Cleaver's stay in Havana, the government attempted to redirect his revolutionary thinking away from armed struggle, since the pro-Soviets concluded that the conditions did not exist within the US for it to even be considered. Furthermore, the Cubans understood that public statements from a top Black Panther leader emanating from Havana could have disastrous effects on the safety of the country. Amuchastegui asserted that in the late 1960s they were not willing to risk almost certain retaliation for *any* leader.⁴⁴

The mystery surrounding Cleaver's disappearance from the US was solved when a Reuters reporter learned that the Panther leader was in Havana and confronted him at his apartment. Both Cleaver and the Cubans knew that the US government might use the discovery as an excuse to retaliate. Cleaver was concerned for his own safety, however, from two directions: not only was he a fugitive from US law, but given his constant conflicts with the Cuban government and increasing disillusionment in the face of what he saw to be reactionary features in the regime and within Cuban society itself, he no longer felt safe in the care of his Cuban hosts.⁴⁵

With Cleaver's consent, the Cubans arranged for him to temporarily leave the island in May 1969 and seek refuge in Algeria, to which he was escorted by a Cuban diplomat. But by that time, Cleaver had concluded—like Williams before him—that real solidarity and support for the US revolution would have to be sought elsewhere. Therefore, immediately upon arrival, Cleaver made arrangements to remain in Africa.⁴⁶

Conclusion

The analysis above demonstrates that the issue of security—both the Black leaders' individual safety concerns and Cuba's national security—was decided by the outcome of the struggle to set policy which raged between the two Cuban factions throughout the first half of the decade. The traditional Communist Party, or pro-Moscow, faction, which eventually prevailed, sought to move Cuba into the Soviet camp for protection and economic stability. The Guevarists, by contrast, lobbied for spearheading the forceful overthrow of the world capitalist system in order to ultimately safeguard Cuban security without sacrificing its independent revolutionary path.

Addressing Black leaders' personal safety concerns within the fluctuations of Cuban security policy was in many ways a difficult task. Every US Black leader faced a threat to his or her personal safety, as illustrated in the harassment and eventual assassinations of King and Malcolm X. The FBI, in coordination with other enforcement agencies, waged a massive and in many ways illegal counter-intelligence effort throughout the decade to crush the Black Movement.

Therefore, as desperate exiles fled to Cuba seeking shelter in the allegedly revolutionary and sympathetic state, the debate between the Guevarists and the pro-Soviets over the most effective national security strategy was

⁴⁴ Amuchastegui, interview.

⁴⁵ Cleaver, interview.

⁴⁶ For details of Cleaver's exile in Algeria and his establishment of the Black Panther Party International headquarters, see Kathleen Neal Cleaver, "Back to Africa: The Evolution of the International Section of the Black Panther Party (1969–1972)," in Charles E. Jones (ed.), *The Black Panther Party [Reconsidered]* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998).

thrown into sharp relief. The limits to Cuban solidarity were tested throughout the decade and beyond by Black activists such as Robert Williams and Black Panthers Eldridge Cleaver, Huey P. Newton, and Assata Shakur seeking exile.

The sojourns of Williams and Cleaver illustrate the erratic shifts in Cuban policy toward the US Movement. Far from the omnipotent and omnipresent leader that he is usually considered, Castro was often perceived by both Williams and Cleaver as being unaware of or misinformed about actual policy actions taken toward US Blacks, as reactionary elements within the regime impeded communication and relations with some militants. Both of these leaders eventually left Cuba, citing a betrayal of revolutionary ideals on the part of powerful Communist Party stalwarts.

Two years before his death, Eldridge Cleaver reflected on the Black Panther Party's relationship with the evolving regime in its nascent years. "Although some of the Cubans certainly believed there could be a US revolution, you have to distinguish between politics and practice. In looking at whether the Cubans are 'revolutionary', both in their official political statements and their voting record at the United Nations they never wavered from total support of the Black Movement. But in *practice*, that's where problems came in. They would invite African Americans to be there for special occasions, but the problem lay in the kind of actual support we needed to make the revolution here in the United States."⁴⁷ In the end, this is where the Cuban regime fell short in the minds of many 1960s Black radicals who were desperately seeking that elusive international ally willing to risk all for the revolution in the belly of the beast.

⁴⁷ Cleaver, interview.