A "Friend of the Revolution" or a “Traitor”?

Vasco Tristão Leitão da Cunha, Fidel Castro (and his Sister), and Brazilian-Cuban Relations, 1956-1964

By James G. Hershberg
Professor of History and International Affairs
George Washington University
(jhershb@gwu.edu)

Presented to the Panel, “New Perspectives on Latin America’s Cold War”
International Studies Association/Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales
(ISA/FLACSO) Conference, Buenos Aires, Argentina, 23 July 2014
This presentation draws on my ongoing book project on the US-Cuban-Brazilian triangular relationship (or quadrangular, if one adds their relations with what was quaintly still known as the “Sino-Soviet bloc”) at the height of the Cold War, in the early 1960s, a span encompassing such tumultuous events as the Cuban Revolution, the Bay of Pigs affair, and the Cuban Missile Crisis. My inquiry originated in, and spun off from, my longstanding in the international history of the October 1962 missile crisis, when in the late 1990s I first noticed (in a translated Soviet document) that at the height of the missile crisis, Brazil was involved in a secret mediation effort between US President John F. Kennedy and Cuban leader Fidel Castro. That Soviet document described a meeting between Castro and a special emissary sent by Brazil’s president, João Goulart, just after the crisis climaxed, relaying what in fact was a laundered U.S. proposal (although Castro didn’t realize that). On searching for background in the relevant literature—to use in annotating the document for the Cold War International History Project Bulletin, which I then edited—I discovered that none existed. And the more I delved into the matter, in U.S., British, Russian, Canadian, Brazilian, French, and other archives, the more fascinating and potentially exciting the story became. It not only constituted an untold dimension of the endlessly-told tale of the missile crisis, but the climax to three years of Brazil’s secret attempts to mediate the growing US-Cuban confrontation, a stretch from 1960 through 1962 spanning two U.S. presidents (Dwight D. Eisenhower and JFK) and three Brazilian presidents (Juscelino Kubitschek, Jânio Quadros, and Goulart).
More than that, I found that the Cuban issue during this tumultuous period—about which myriad books and articles, scholarly and popular, have been written—was inextricably linked to Brazil, in ways that scholars have largely ignored. For the battle over Cuba was part of a larger Cold War struggle over the future of Latin America, and in that complex, passionate competition, Brazil (not little Cuba) clearly represented the ultimate prize, as the hemisphere’s largest, most populous, and economically and strategically most important nation. In fact, the evidence showed, John F. Kennedy’s nightmare and Nikita Khrushchev’s (and Fidel Castro’s) dream were one and the same—that Brazil would turn into the hemisphere’s “second Cuba,” a revolutionary upheaval that would bring a communist, pro-Soviet regime to power, and cause a leftist tsunami inspired by Havana, Moscow, and/or Beijing to overwhelm Latin America. So while most public (and later scholarly) attention focused on Cuba, a shadow struggle raged between East and West to try to shape the outcome of the continuing turbulence in Brazil—until, in early 1964, a military coup, backed by the CIA, toppled Goulart and ended more than three years of leftist (or at least center-leftist) rule characterized by recurring political and economic crises and a self-described “independent” foreign policy that meant to attain, and show, tangible separation from Washington (even to the point of flirtation with the “nonalignment movement,” then at its peak).

The basic concept of my book-in-progress is that while many fine studies examine the birth, evolution, pivotal moments, and consequences of the US-Cuban conflict as well the internal history of Castro’s revolution—and a smaller yet significant number of works explore Brazil’s domestic history and US-Brazilian relations during this period—none seriously probe the interrelationship of Brazil and Cuba during this period and both
countries’ concurrent relations with both East and West (not to mention those powers, such as Yugoslavia, India, Egypt, and Indonesia, trying to straddle the blocs).\footnote{A not atypical example of how more narrowly conceived studies of bilateral US-Cuban relations can miss important points by omitting Brazil occurs in perhaps the most important study of the topic in recent years, Lars Schoultz’s That Infernal Little Cuban Republic: The United States and the Cuban Revolution (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009). In chapter eight, Schoultz accurately notes and describes how Lyndon B. Johnson, in 1964, sharply downgraded Cuba’s importance in U.S. foreign policy compared to his predecessor’s constant and energetic focus on (i.e., obsession with) Castro. However, he fails to mention a crucial reason why LBJ’s concern about Cuba’s impact on Latin America waned in 1964: that spring, after years of gnawing U.S. concern about the danger of “Castroism” spreading, in some form, to Brazil, a sternly anti-communist military junta seized power, in what was widely seen as a major victory for Washington and defeat for Havana. Upon learning of the coup’s success, LBJ suggested that Cuba could now be considered “just a nuisance,” and his secretary of state, Dean Rusk, observed that the Brazilian events could have “a beneficial effect on the Cuban problem” as well as in Chile (which was holding elections later that year). See record of 525th National Security Council meeting, 2 April 1964, in U.S. Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1964-1968, Vol. XXXI: South and Central America; Mexico (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2004), p. 454. (In his excellent survey of US Cold War policies in Latin America, Stephen Rabe also ignores the Brazilian coup in his explanation of LBJ’s reversal of his predecessor’s policy of approving covert attacks on Cuba: Stephen G. Rabe, The Killing Zone: The United States Wages Cold War in Latin America (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 79-80.)} By doing so, I hope to tell some new stories, recast some old ones with new evidentiary and interpretive twists, and uncover (from a wide array of Eastern and Western sources) fresh insights pertinent to a variety of crucial topics, from the roots and early years of the US-Cuban confrontation, to the international history of the cold war and the US-Soviet crises over Cuba, to the reverberations of the Sino-Soviet struggle in Latin America, to the limits of an “independent” foreign policy within the US sphere of influence, to the role of third-country mediators in international conflicts.

Enhancing the appeal and potential utility of such an inquiry, in recent years Brazilian archives have largely, if not entirely, opened up for this period, enabling a
probe of governmental and diplomatic actions and decision-making and a serious exploration of authentic perspectives far beyond what is available simply from U.S. sources—which is, unfortunately, what even scholarly surveys of Washington’s relations with Brazil (and the rest of Latin America, for that matter) have tended to rely on.² On a research trip to the Brazilian foreign ministry archives in Brasília in 2000, I gathered more than 4000 pages of diplomatic cables, memoranda, and other documents, many of which I have translated from Portuguese (using, I admit, half-learned high school Spanish and a Portuguese-English dictionary), as well as records from the papers of former Brazilian foreign minister Santiago Dantas, at the Arquivo Nacional in Rio de Janeiro³; and since then additional collections have become accessible, particularly at the Fundação Getúlio Vargas (FGV) in Rio.⁴ The Brazilian sources supplement newly-available sources from other non-U.S. quadrants on both sides of the former Iron


⁴ Including the personal papers of Vasco Leitão da Cunha, Brazil’s ambassador to Cuba from 1956-61, which I have consulted.
Curtain—including many nations in the former communist realm, although Cuban archives remain largely inaccessible, except for a privileged few.

Before getting diverted a decade ago onto a Vietnam War book, which finally appeared two years ago\(^5\), I had made considerable progress on this inquiry, and am now plunging back into research and writing. Before the present essay, I wrote articles presenting early findings on Brazil’s role in the Cuban Missile Crisis; its flirtation with the Nonaligned Movement; and its duel with Washington over Cuba policy in the period leading up to the January 1962 Organization of American States (OAS) meeting in Punta del Este, Uruguay.\(^6\) Now I am working on the earlier period surrounding the Cuban Revolution, and as the narrative below shows, I believe the story of Brazilian-Cuban interactions during this period can be fruitfully explored through the tale of relations between two key figures: naturally, one is Fidel Castro; and the other, historiographically lost in the background, is the diplomat who represented Brazil in Havana for the period surrounding the revolution: the last two years of Fulgencio Batista’s rule and the first two years of Fidel Castro’s.

*****


At almost the same moment in late 1956, two men headed separately for Cuba. They hailed from different lands, transited different points of departure and arrival, traveled by very different means, and history would treat their coincident journeys very differently: one became the stuff of legends, endlessly retold and celebrated (or reviled) and mythologized; the other, a forgotten footnote to a now obscure figure.

After midnight on November 24-25, 1956, Fidel Castro, the aspiring young (30 years old) Cuban revolutionary, left Mexico’s east coast along with more than 80 compañeros from his “July 26th Movement,” including his brother Raul and Argentine medical student Ernesto “Che” Guevara, aboard a not-entirely-seaworthy yacht known as the Granma. They hoped, in coordination with insurgents already on the island, to spark an uprising that would topple the dictatorship, but the landing on Cuba’s southeastern coast on December 2 (after a “nightmarish” voyage) quickly went sour: Batista’s forces killed or arrested most of the seasick arriving force, and quashed an abortive revolt in the city of Santiago de Cuba. Still, a dozen or so (the number has been disputed) surviving barbudos, including Fidel, Raul, and Che, escaped into the nearby Sierra Maestra mountains, from which they would organize a guerrilla war that would take power barely more than two years later. After Batista fled the country (with a few family members and cronies and considerable riches) on New Year’s Eve, the victorious guerrillas marched into Havana and Santiago de Cuba and seized power at the beginning of January 1959.7

---

More conventionally, on November 27, 1956, as the *Granma* sailed towards Oriente province on its clandestine mission, Vasco Tristão Leitão da Cunha flew to Havana to take up the position of Brazil’s ambassador to Cuba. A distinguished mid-career professional diplomat, age 53, he had formerly served as Rio de Janeiro’s envoy to various European and Latin American countries. For the next four-and-a-quarter years, until early 1961 (when he left for Rio to become director-general of Itamaraty, the Brazilian foreign ministry), Leitão da Cunha would have a front-row seat for the events surrounding the revolution: the last two-plus years of Batista, and the first two-plus years of Fidel Castro.

But he did more than bear witness. During that stretch, he became widely viewed as the perhaps the most important foreign diplomat in town, second only to the U.S. ambassador--a figure da Cunha likened, in the years and decades in Cuba preceding Castro, to a Roman proconsul given Washington's pervasive political and economic influence. (Once Castro took power, that status fast faded. As US-Cuban relations frayed, Washington repeatedly recalled its envoy in 1960, prior to the final, formal rupture in early January 1961. By then, da Cunha would observe, the Soviet

---


ambassador was endowed with the prestigious status accorded Washington’s representative during the years of the Platt Amendment.\(^{10}\)

Increasingly, in the final phases of Batista's rule, da Cunha earned a reputation as an opponent of the dictatorship's brutality and corruption and, hence, as a "friend of the Cuban revolution," as he would later agree.\(^{11}\) Earl Smith, Eisenhower’s ambassador to Batista’s Cuba (who was so close to the dictator that he left almost immediately after the revolution’s victory), recalled that da Cunha “was well known for his sympathy toward the motives of the revolutionaries.”\(^{12}\) The Brazilian expressed this sympathy, felt even more strongly by his wife Virginia (“Nininha”), concretely by allowing his embassy and then his home to become a haven to revolutionaries and dissidents seeking asylum from Batista and his henchmen. These houseguests, whose number steadily grew in late 1958, numbered several who would have key roles after Castro took power, as well as Fidel's younger sister, Juanita (about whom more later). While still leading the revolution in the mountains, Fidel would recognize da Cunha’s contribution by sending him a letter of thanks, and then he called on him in Havana in January 1959 only days after entering the city to take power (the first foreign diplomat he saw). According to a key diplomatic colleague in Havana, the Argentine ambassador, da Cunha “contributed, maybe more

---


\(^{11}\) Da Cunha, Diplomacy em Alto-Mar, p. 212

than anyone...[he was] one of the predominant factors that most helped the triumph of the revolution.”

Capitalizing on the contacts developed with asylum-seekers who were now in power, as well as a now well-established reputation for sympathy to the revolution, the ambassador and his wife initially enjoyed fairly intimate ties with the new rulers. He was, the New York Times later commented, ”perhaps the ambassador on closest personal terms with Mr. Castro in the early days of the revolutionary regime.” According to one close observer who encountered both men in revolutionary Havana, Fidel Castro even regarded da Cunha (23 years older) as a “father figure”—an “extremely dignified” older man who felt “a lot of understanding and personal affection for Fidel”—who, in turn, had grown estranged from his own biological father. In Diplomacy em Alto Mar, the closest thing we have to a da Cunha memoir (actually a collection of transcripts of oral history interviews conducted in 1983), one can find photos of Vasco and Virginia smiling broadly next to Fidel and Che, with the Brazilians in formal party attire and the barbudos in military fatigues. In early 1960, two US diplomats who liked Vasco personally also saw him as overly sympathetic to Castro—the ambassador to Brazil thought him “starry-eyed,” while Eisenhower’s envoy to Havana thought him dominated by his “active and opinionated wife who regards herself as a cross between a mother hen and Joan of Arc in relation to the revolution and its leaders.”

---

13 Julio Amoedo, interview transcript (n.d. but donated 1964), Hoover Institution, Stanford University (author’s translation from Spanish).
15 Interview with Henry Raymont (former United Press International correspondent), 10 May 2013, Washington, DC.
16 Bonsal to Rubottom letter, 9 April 1960, folder 9, box 1, Bonsal papers, Library of Congress (LC).
Yet, after a short honeymoon period, da Cunha’s assessment of Castro and his rule would darken. Within two years, the Brazilian ambassador (and, importantly, his wife) had been fully disillusioned and even alienated, politically, intellectually, and emotionally, by Fidel and the direction he was taking his nation, even as he maintained cordial contacts with the revolutionary leaders. In early 1961, on the eve of the Bay of Pigs invasion, he had a series of top-level meetings in Havana in a futile last-ditch effort to head off the looming US-Cuban confrontation. But now he acted as a strong adversary of the Cuban government, which he saw as a committed communist Soviet ally, and even began engaging with Cuban exiles committed to overthrowing Castro (and their CIA handler). After stints as Itamaraty’s director-general and then as Goulart’s ambassador to Nikita Khrushchev’s Soviet Union, this erstwhile friend of the Cuban Revolution would be appointed foreign minister in 1964 by the junta that ousted Goulart and in this position preside over Brazil’s formal break in relations with Cuba, firmly aligning his country with Washington (where he would go as Brazil’s ambassador to the United States from 1966 to 1968).

Now fully in the U.S. camp on the issue, da Cunha, only a few years after being suspected of unseemly friendship for Fidel Castro, would earn rave reviews from the CIA and even Walt Rostow, LBJ’s hawkish national security adviser. He was, the CIA gushed, “a brilliant scion of an old and distinguished family,” “an old school, highly respected senior career diplomat of obvious pro-Western and democratic orientation,” a man of “unusual honesty and integrity.”

17 CIA, Office of Central Reference, Biographic Register, profile of Vasco Tristão Leitão da CUNHA, August 1964 (sanitized), NSF, Country File, “Brazil-Codel/Fulbright, 8/65,” Box 9, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library (LBJL), Austin, TX. See also the profile prepared for Lyndon Johnson in January
Brazilian paid a farewell call, da Cunha was “one of the few statesmen worthy of the name in Latin America,” “smart and urbane,” a “wise Brazilian, American, and citizen of the world,” a “man of vision” who valued close US-Brazilian cooperation.  

How, when, and why did this transformation take place? What, if anything, might those answers, and da Cunha’s story, suggest for the broader trajectory of the Castro revolution’s relations with both the United States and Brazil, and the rest of the hemisphere, during that period? Can we learn, by viewing the final efforts to avoid a final break between Washington and Havana though da Cunha’s lens, anything new about the origins of the US-Cuban confrontation that persists more than a half-century later?

Other mysteries emerge about da Cunha’s personal stance. Despite some U.S. demurrals about his sympathy for Castro, he received high marks as a professional. Philip W. Bonsal, the last U.S. ambassador in Havana before the rupture in relations in January 1961, remarked that da Cunha was “generally considered to be one of the most knowledgeable of foreign observers” in the Cuban capital, while Britain’s ambassador, Sir Herbert S. Marchant, described him as “an extremely able and polished performer professionally and a most likeable colleague.”

To the New York Times (writing a few
years later, when he was Brazil’s foreign minister), da Cunha was “the image of the classic Western diplomat. Elegant, urbane, witty, fluent in languages, patient and deft.”

Yet, I found, mysteries persist about his basic orientation. This self-described “friend” of Cuba’s revolution, who offered safety to key revolutionaries, also told a U.S. diplomat, a few months before Batista fell, that rather than seeing a “public uprising sparked by the revolutionary opposition” take power, he preferred a “military coup by responsible officers who were tired with the existing state of affairs.” Fearing bloody “chaos” in a revolutionary takeover, he “thought that a strong military junta offered the best hope for controlling mob action.” Before he pleased Washington by swerving to a strongly anti-Castro stance, contradictory evidence also emerged about da Cunha’s fundamental political sympathies: even as one US diplomat judged da Cunha “pro-American and reasonably conservative,” the British ambassador in Havana in early 1961 described his Brazilian colleague as “basically anti-United States and this feeling has undoubtedly been part of the common ground between himself and the Castro leaders.” In the latter vein, France’s envoy in Cuba noted that da Cunha, “as a Brazilian, and even though he maintains on a personal level very good relations with [U.S. ambassador Bonsal,] often seems irritated, like most Latin-Americans, by the industrial

22 Memorandum of Conversation, Sr. Vasco T.L. Da Cunha-William G. Bowdler, 7 August 1958, Central Decimal File (CDF) 737.00/8-758, Box 3079, Central Decimal Files, 1956-1959, Record Group (RG) 59, National Archives (NA), College Park, MD.
23 Cabot-Da Cunha memocon, 7 March 1960, Central Decimal Files 737.00, box 1600, CDF, 1960-63, RG 59.
24 H.S. Marchant to Geoffrey Wallinger, 15 February 1961, FO 371/156139, UK National Archives.
and financial superiority of the major Anglo-Saxon Republic of the New World.”

Despite their cordial personal ties, that American ambassador who dealt with da Cunha in Castro’s Havana warily wrote in April 1960 that “he talks out of both sides of his mouth,” and a key State Department official under Eisenhower, upon meeting da Cunha, termed him an “opportunist” who coddles Castro, though he would “probably” follow his government’s instructions.

These are some of the questions and mysteries I am working on.

*****

When da Cunha reached Havana near the end of November 1956, it was his first time there since 1940 (when Cuba’s capital hosted a Pan-American foreign ministers’ conference). All around him he noticed dramatic changes—signs of rapid and extensive development that put the city and the country in the same league with more advanced Latin American economies (da Cunha compared it to Venezuela and Argentina “before Peron ruined [it]”). Of course, much of the “great prosperity” da Cunha discerned came from the riches transferred from the United States, in the form of tourism and investment, including the organized crime syndicates who essentially controlled the city’s gambling and entertainment industry, turning Havana into a tropical version of Las Vegas, luring

---


27 Da Cunha, Diplomacy em Alto-Mar, p. 196.
Americans with the promise of “sex, sand, and sin.” It was the heyday of Mafia crime bosses like Meyer Lansky who ran (and in many cases built and financed) the city’s glittering nightclubs, hotels, brothels, and casinos, and shared the loot with the corrupt Batista machine, both civilian and military.28

Da Cunha noticed this “life of luxury,” of course (and to an unclear degree partook of it), but from the start also sensed the “atmosphere of impending civil war.” By the time he presented his credentials to Batista on December 6, 1956, the abortive revolt had erupted in Santiago (timed to coincide with the arrival of the Granma). A few months later, on March 13, 1957, violence broke out in central Havana when urban revolutionaries staged an attack on the Presidential Palace, hoping to assassinate the dictator. Instead, Batista’s forces fought off the assault, killing many of its leaders, and in the aftermath, went on a rampage, seeking anyone they could tie to the conspiracy to arrest and in many cases torture.

It was this dragnet that led to the first instance of the activity that would pull the Brazilian ambassador, and his embassy, closer to the struggle and earn Batista’s enmity (and Castro’s gratitude)—granting asylum. On Easter Sunday, a month or so after the failed palace attack, da Cunha was attending mass when his wife called from home, explaining that they had a visitor. Vasco rushed back to welcome him, so he was not

caught by the police while waiting “on the street.”

He was the first of many. Over the next nineteen or so months, the embassy, and then the da Cunha residence, would shelter

---

29 A recent novel whose early sections are set in Havana in 1957 contains a case of art imitating life. After escaping the clutches of a top Batista’s torturer, who suspects her of ties to the revolutionaries (her boyfriend had been killed in the palace attack), a young woman named Renata makes her way to the Brazilian Embassy, “which occupied suites in an nine-story office building on the corner of Infanta and Twenty-third at the Malécon,” claiming to be the ambassador’s niece, to gain political asylum and then safe-passage to emigrate to the United States. See William Kennedy, *Chango’s Beads and Two-Tone Shoes* (New York: Viking, 2011), pp. 289-91.

30 The first asylum-seeker (whom da Cunha did not identify in his oral history) may well have been Marcos Armando Rodriguez, a bookish young communist (he worked at a library for a literary society) who had attended cultural events at the embassy and become friendly with Virginia da Cunha, who, the author Robert Quirk writes, “like many older women, enjoyed talking about philosophy and literature with effeminate young men. ‘She liked me very much,’ he told Castro later.” Quirk, *Fidel Castro*, p. 496.

Rodriguez’s case later, in 1964, exploded into a huge controversy that roiled the Cuban revolutionary leadership. He had sought shelter in the Brazilian embassy after Batista’s police had raided (on April 20) an apartment at 7 Humboldt Street where four student members of the Directorio Revolucionario Estudiantil (DRE) who had escaped after the failed palace attack were hiding, killing them. The day before, Rodriguez had been in the apartment, a friend of one of those machine-gunned. After several months in the embassy, Rodriguez received a safe conduct pass and left the country for Costa Rica. After the revolution won, he returned, and was sent to Czechoslovakia to study and on a diplomatic mission. (Virginia had urged Fidel to send him to Prague as cultural attaché. (Quirk, *Fidel Castro*, p. 497.) However, suspicions mounted about his loyalty to the revolutionary cause, and according to one account he was in fact being blackmailed by the CIA to provide information. (Ibid.) In December 1960 da Cunha sent an urgent warning to Rodriguez (via the Brazilian Legation in Prague) warning him not to return to Cuba under any circumstances, as the DRE and PSP were laying a trap for him that could cost his life. Obviously reflecting the friendship that had developed while he was in the embassy, da Cunha even offered his own financial aid if Rodriguez required it. See Brazilian Embassy (da Cunha), tel. 360, 1 December 1960, AMRE. However, in early January, 1961, he was arrested by Czechoslovak authorities, who jailed him for several weeks, and then extradited him to Cuba, where he spent three years in prison before being put on trial in 1964. (At his trial, he said a Brazilian diplomat had approached him “[d]ays before his arrest,” warned him of his impending arrest, and “offered him the means to escape from Czechoslovakia.” “For me that was impossible to accept,” he wrote in his confession. “This would have meant abandoning the Party, the Revolution and all I have fought for.” “No one at the trial made an effort to explain how Da Cunha had learned in advance of Rodriguez’ danger,” a U.S. government summary of the case noted.) Before being
a growing number of people on the lam from Batista. In particular, Vasco recalled, “My wife helped create an ambience for refugees. She was cheering [da torcida] for the revolution. Not manifested officially, but [she] had sympathy for the revolution.”

Vasco recalled that he “had less, because I thought that revolution in general ends badly,” and that “evolution is recommended, not revolution.” In particular, he felt the efforts in 1955-56 for a “Civic Dialogue” between Batista and his enemies to attain a political compromise and a peaceful transition through fair elections from Batista’s rule undertaken by a venerated national hero, Colonel Cosmo de la Torriente y Peraza, who had fought valiantly for Cuban independence from Spain during the 1895-98 revolution, could have averted the bloodshed which followed. But Batista rejected these efforts, and

arrested—it’s not clear precisely when—Rodriguez had written Virginia da Cunha, saying that “he feared for his life, because he ‘knew too much.’” (Quirk, Fidel Castro, p. 497.) At the trial, in March 1964, Rodriguez confessed to having tipped off one of Batista’s most notorious police chiefs, Lt. Col. Esteban Ventura Novo, allowing them to eliminate the hiding DRE activists. “Pretending to be a fugitive from Ventura’s esbirros [goons],” Rodriguez found refuge in the Brazilian embassy. The highly-publicized proceedings in Havana related to the Rodriguez case exposed sensitive divisions between the urban communists and revolutionary groups, including charges of cooperation between the communists and Batista; links with Rodriguez cast suspicion on some senior Cuban officials associated with the Communist old guard, including Joaquín Ordoqui, who Fidel Castro criticized harshly for not reporting evidence of Rodriguez’ treachery. After the sensational “Calle Humboldt” trial—climaxed by Fidel personally appearing to interrogate the accused—Rodriguez was executed in April 1964. [Unclassified U.S. government summary, n.d., “Trial of Marcos Rodriguez Alfonso,” access on-line at latinamericanstudies.org/marcos-rodriguez.htm; see also Quirk, Fidel Castro, pp. 496-505; Thomas, The Cuban Revolution, esp. pp. 147-48, 541, 691-2; Szulc, Fidel, p. 459.] That same month, the new military rulers who had seized power from Goulart in Brazil named Vasco da Cunha foreign minister. As Thomas noted (p. 692), a “main point never cleared up” in the murky story is “how it was that Rodriguez could have been warned, when in Prague in 1961, of his impending arrest, by a Brazilian diplomat.” Also unclear is whether in fact Rodriguez was the asylum-seeker who appeared at the Brazilian Embassy on Easter Sunday, April 21, the day after the police assault on 7 Humboldt Street; one account (Quirk, Fidel Castro, p. 496) says he did not go to the Brazilian embassy until three days later.

Cosmo de la Torriente died, disappointed, in December 1956, shortly after the Brazilian’s arrival. As Hugh Thomas later judged, "This Diálogo Cívico represented what turned out to be the last hope for Cuban middle-class democracy, but Batista was far too strong and entrenched in his position to make any concessions." After Toriente’s death, observed Thomas Paterson, the “already slim hopes for an electoral solution to Batista’s rule faded fast.” Da Cunha’s apprehensions about a revolutionary outcome were evident in his August 1958 conversation with a U.S. diplomat, noted above, in which he expressed preference for a “military coup by responsible officers” over a revolutionary “public uprising” that would entail “mob” action and reprisals.

Yet, when he recalled events more than two decades later, to a fellow Brazilian rather than an American official, da Cunha suggested that he had inclined toward a different choice, once he recognized that his preferred solution (an “evolutionary” path along the lines of Cosmo de la Torriente’s efforts) was no longer a plausible option. “[W]hen the revolution is on the street, we have to take a position: either for or against. In Cuba I think it was an attempt to improve [Cuba?], but I always had my suspicion of collusion with the Communists.”

That meant Fidel Castro and his “26 July Movement” (M-26-7) rural guerrillas, especially after the urban revolutionaries were decimated after the failure of the palace

---


33 Quoted in “Batista,” by J.A. Sierra, on the historyofcuba.com website.

34 Paterson, *Contesting Castro*, p. 27.

35 Memorandum of Conversation, Sr. Vasco T.L. Da Cunha-William G. Bowdler, 7 August 1958, Central Decimal File (CDF) 737.00/8-758, Box 3079, CDF, 1956-1959, RG 59, NA.

assault and ensuing crackdown.\textsuperscript{37} Very quickly, “from the beginning,” da Cunha sensed that Castro was gaining momentum and headed for eventual victory in his quest to oust Batista and take over Cuba.\textsuperscript{38} The U.S. ambassador there when da Cunha arrived, Arthur Gardner, who left in June 1957, pooh-poohed Castro and, before leaving, confidently told his Brazilian colleague: "You stay calm with relation to this boy. Soon he'll be cowed, have no doubt that he is not going beyond that ...\textsuperscript{39} But da Cunha discerned Castro’s popularity, especially after he brazenly defied Batista’s repeated claims that government forces had killed or defeated him, and continued to mount attacks; in the Brazilian’s view (and many others’), Castro’s appeal stemmed not so much from concrete “socio-political” or “political” doctrines, but simply the widespread desire for an end to Batista’s repressive rule. “The Cuban bourgeoisie wanted to end the gunmen of Batista,” he recalled. “There was arbitrary imprisonment, surreptitious killings…Fidel only had to win, only had to grow.”\textsuperscript{40}

Contemporaneous evidence remains rather sparse on da Cunha’s private views, actions, and advice during the Batista period—relatively few of his classified cables have surfaced—but his conversation with a U.S. embassy officer in August 1958 offers some clues to his attitudes.\textsuperscript{41} He was “very pessimistic” about the outlook for a solution to the civil war, sensing a military “stalemate” between the Army and revolution which could persist “for sometime,” during which “the senseless bloodshed would continue and


\textsuperscript{38} Da Cunha, \textit{Diplomacia am Alto-Mar}, p. 198.

\textsuperscript{39} Da Cunha, \textit{Diplomacy em Alto-Mar}, p. 196.

\textsuperscript{40} Da Cunha, \textit{Diplomacia am Alto-Mar}, pp. 196-97.

\textsuperscript{41} Da Cunha-Bowdlner, 7 August 1958, cited above.
probably get worse.” He saw no solution, certainly not in the sham elections which Batista was considering, and as mentioned above he seemed to prefer a “responsible” military coup to a revolutionary breakdown of order. For the moment, he was completely appalled by the “police brutality in Habana, particularly during the past month,” saying it had “reached such a point that he thought the Diplomatic Corps should make some type of representation to the Government.” (His American interlocutor was noncommittal, and it doesn’t seem any such action was taken.) In desperation da Cunha expressed the hope that Washington would “use its preponderant influence in Cuba to encourage a solution,” only to elicit a pious protestation that the United States respected its obligation not to interfere in the internal affairs of other nations. Unconvinced, da Cunha “stated that there eventually comes a time when for the sake of humanity a nation must not adhere too rigidly to legal concepts”—a hint of a desire for “humanitarian intervention” that belied Brazil’s traditional strict insistence on juridical preclusion of any such interference.

Later, da Cunha would distinctly recall foreseeing the inevitable conclusion to the story. He remembered predicting, at the beginning of December 1958, to U.S. ambassador Earl Smith that, “By the end of the month Fidel will win it.”

"He will win nothing!" the American, well-known for his closeness to Batista, shot back.

In the Brazilian’s memory, he replied: "You, who are the ambassador of the United States of America, who must have sources of information that I don’t have, think so. But I guarantee that by the end of the month Batista is in the ground."42

One contemporary source implies a somewhat more hedged outlook: on December 23, the US ambassador in Rio reported being told by a Brazilian official that da Cunha “considers increasingly doubtful Batista will be able [to] control situation until end [of] term [in] office [on 24 February 1959], but major factor loyalty military forces. Believes Castro will press for recognition status belligerency if able expand territorial control to include number urban centers. Ambassador [da Cunha] reports Embassy has some dozen political refugees.”43 A cable from da Cunha on December 30 remarked that the situation was growing constantly “more difficult,” and reported the imminent creation of a “provisional government” in rebel-held “free” zones—but hardly predicted an imminent finale.44

Yet it came the next day. On New Year’s Eve, not yet in the ground, Batista instead took to the air, flying into exile after midnight with close family, associates, and a substantial amount of loot to the Dominican Republic. According to Juanita Castro, who had sought asylum in the embassy since September, the first news of this stunning development reached the Brazilian Embassy in the form of Batista’s minister of information, Otto Meruelos, who said his former boss had fled and now pleaded for asylum.45 Da Cunha later remembered that the news ran officially at 2:30 a.m.—and only ten or fifteen minutes later, the knocks on the door began, “and Bastianos were arriving.”

The ex-dictator’s cronies began to streaming in to seek refuge even as asylees already

43 U.S. Embassy, Rio de Janeiro (Briggs), tel. no. 856, 23 December 1958, CDF 737.00/12-2358, box 3080, CDF, 1956-59, RG 59, NA.
44 Brazilian Embassy, Havana (da Cunha), tel. 172, 30 December 1958, AMRE, transcribed copy in MB/NSA. All quotations from Brazilian documents are the author’s unofficial translations from Portuguese.
45 Juanita Castro Ruz and Maria Antonieta Collins, Fidel y Raúl, Mis Hermanos: La Historia Secreta (Aguilar, 2009), p. 188.
inside the embassy who had hid from Batista’s police prepared to leave amid the euphoria greeting the revolution’s victory—among them Fidel’s sister, who left the embassy on January 2, 1959, after several months inside. Almost seamlessly, as political power turned upside down, da Cunha continued in his consistent role as defender of the right of political asylum—only now those seeking it would do so for protection from those they had formerly lorded over, who had themselves sought asylum in the same place. This led to some surreal moments. On the night of January 4-5, 1959, a few days after revolutionaries had entered Havana, and amid considerable chaos, da Cunha received a phone call from the U.S. ambassador, Earl Smith, asking him to come with him to a military headquarters to try to save Gen. Eulogia Cantillo, Batista’s army chief, from summary execution. To Smith’s relief, because he wanted a witness and also because the Brazilian was “well known for his sympathy toward the motives of the revolutionaries,” da Cunha agreed to accompany him and they drove together past “shooting in the streets” to “Camp Columbia,” where Smith had an appointment with Castro’s commander, Major Camilio Cienfuegos. Before the appointment, Smith was amazed when da Cunha “introduced me to a stout, friendly bearded man who, he said, had sought asylum in the Brazilian Embassy. I learned from the Ambassador that this individual had been the second in command of Batista’s Military Intelligence for approximately two years. All that time he had been one of Castro’s most valuable spies.” Ultimately, Smith and da Cunha persuaded Cienfuegos to stand down the firing squad, as execution without trial would embarrass the revolution “in world opinion.”

---

From the start, da Cunha staunchly insisted that the new revolutionary
government respect the immunity of diplomatic missions. On January 5, he went to the
presidential palace, with a handful of other ambassadors, to appeal to the newly-installed
president, Manuel Urrutia, to respect their sanctity (they ended up meeting the entire
cabinet). This principled stance also brought him into contact, for the first time, with
one of the revolution’s key figures, Ernesto “Che” Guevara, who had led the march into
Havana (as Fidel’s column victoriously entered Santiago de Cuba). As da Cunha
recalled, after student revolutionaries attempted to storm the Colombian embassy (located
in a hotel) to seize a Batistiano asylum-seeker, he was contacted for help. Da Cunha
made some hasty contacts, and the next morning, Che appeared at the Brazilian embassy
to apologize for the behavior of his troops, saying they were “hotheads” and their
“unacceptable behavior” would not be repeated. “I was impressed,” recalled da Cunha,
who clearly respected Che as a “serious man.”

Then there was Fidel, with whom, for a time, da Cunha had “a great friendship,”
according to Juanita Castro. Only days after entering Havana, on January 8, 1959, the
revolution’s leader made a beeline for the Brazilian embassy, the first foreign mission of
any kind that he visited. As the U.S. embassy in Brazil reported after hearing an account,
Fidel called on da Cunha to “express thanks for asylum given anti-Batista, refugees,

---

48 See A.S. Fordham, British Embassy, Havana, to Henry Hankey, American Dept., Foreign Office, 8
January 1959, FO 371/139430, UKNA; El Avance (Habana), 7 January 1959 (photo caption misidentifies
da Cunha as the British ambassador). On January 1, the Brazilian ambassador had joined his U.S.,
Argentine, Chilean, and Spanish colleagues, and the Papal Nuncio, as a committee to ask for safe conduct
for all asylees. U.S. Embassy, Habana (Smith), tel. no. 674, 1 January 1959, CDF 737.00/1-159, box 3080,
RG 59, NA.

49 Da Cunha, Diplomacy em Alto-Mar, p. 201.

50 Juanita Castro Ruz and Collins, Fidel y Raul, Mis Hermanos, p. 186.
including own sister.” Castro also told da Cunha he wished to visit Brazil and other Latin American countries in the near future (he would do so in late April/early May).  

A few days later, a French news agency reported that da Cunha had been given a banquet by the new rulers “in recognition of the protection and help given to the Cuban revolutionaries,” an honor that prompted a somewhat querulous query from the home office to its ambassador in Havana warning of the “inconvenient” impression this might create of a “partisan attitude” in the final stages of Batista’s reign. In a rather mystified defense, da Cunha explained that the “banquet” was an “unofficial tribute, spontaneously organized without my prior knowledge by ex-political asylees,” including Fidel Castro’s sister. While the ambassador was “naturally averse to this type of manifestation,” he also pointed out that it contributed to the “exceptional aura of prestige” that Brazil now enjoyed in post-Batista Cuba (enhanced by the Brazilian pilots who had flown in the first batch of exiled revolutionaries who had returned home).

During 1959, in the first, often chaotic and violent months of the revolutionary government’s rule, da Cunha seemed to give Castro the benefit of the doubt, finding him personally appealing and resigned to a certain amount of rash and impudent behavior by youthful leaders that he regarded as politically (and in some cases, emotionally) immature. As asylum seekers entered various Latin American embassies, particularly Chile’s but also his own, he repeatedly had to deal with crises requiring him to negotiate safe passage out of the country or prevent revolutionary activists from attacking diplomatic missions. He sought and received

51 US Embassy, Rio de Janeiro (Briggs), tel. no. 932, 15 January 1959, CDF 737.00/1-1559, RG 59, NA.
53 ANEXO Secreto—600.(24h)—SITUAÇÃO POLÍTICOS—1958-1961, AMRE.
assurances from ministers that, despite Castro’s rhetoric implying otherwise, Cuba would not abandon its international commitments, including to the 1947 Rio treaty affirming hemispheric solidarity (a document strongly supported by the United States).\textsuperscript{54}

In early May, he and Virginia accompanied Castro on a two-day visit to Brazil, where the Cuban met with President Juscelino Kubitschek and promised that he would “never curtail” press freedoms.\textsuperscript{55} (Kubitschek later told the U.S. ambassador that “Fidel had spoken to him for six hours without his getting a word in edgewise.”\textsuperscript{56}) In meetings with the Brazilian leader and his defense minister, Castro asked Brazil to sell arms to the revolutionary government, but Kubitschek laid down the line to da Cunha: “You explain to Fidel that we are giving our support to the Cuban revolution, but we do not associate with military activities.”\textsuperscript{57} All in all, despite a restrained reception (owing in part due to widespread disapproval in Brazil, which lacked the death penalty, of the many post-revolution executions in Cuba), Castro was judged to have scored a “considerable personal success” in making a positive impression through press and television interviews. “Sr. Castro, young, romantic, uniformed, and above all bearded, was of course a gift to the press,” a Western diplomat reported. In public appearances he made “tactful references” to Kubitschek’s initiatives on Operation Pan-America (for massive U.S. aid to support economic development in Latin America) and to build a new capital in Brasília (“the first ‘rationally built city in the hemisphere’”); he even praised the leadership and uncharacteristically eschewed excessive rhetoric even at a mass, student-organized rally (unlike

\textsuperscript{54} Brazilian Embassy/Havana (da Cunha), tel. 63, 28 March 1959, AMRE, transcribed copy in MB/NSA.


\textsuperscript{56} John M. Cabot diary, 25 Jan 1960 entry, Cabot papers, Edwin Ginn Library, Tufts University, Medford, MA (accessed via microfilm copy); hereafter “Cabot diary.”

\textsuperscript{57} Da Cunha, \textit{Diplomacia em Alto-Mar}, pp. 210-211.
other speakers who “indulged in some rabble-rousing and radical oratory”).

Perhaps he was less guarded with Vasco and Virginia da Cunha on the trip; the ambassador later recalled that as they flew over the Amazon forest, looking out the window next to his wife, Fidel muttered, “What a country for revolution!”

Over the summer, in Washington, when he lunched with an American diplomat, John Moors Cabot (about to become US ambassador to Brazil), da Cunha related “a more moderate impression of Fidel than I [Cabot] had,” emphasizing the tough challenges the Cuban faced. In August, at an Organization of American States (OAS) meeting in Santiago, Chile, Cuba signed a final declaration affirming fealty to “representative democracy,” including “free elections,” and Major Raul Castro promised movement toward elections. (Through da Cunha, Brazil had urged the Castros to take a more cooperative position.) On September 1, the Brazilian

58 Geoffrey Wallinger, British Ambassador, Rio de Janeiro, to Selwyn Lloyd, Foreign Office, 7 May 1959, FO 371/139411, UKNA. Another diplomatic observer commented: “From the time he alighted from his luxury private aircraft, with an escort of some fifty associates (many bearded), who tried vigorously to wrest from the Brazilian police the responsibility for his protection, until he left on May 7, Fidel Castro barn-stormed his way through a programme, to a considerable extent improvised, by him on the spot. The Cuban ignored protocol and at times, it appeared, elementary courtesy. Much of his time was devoted to what might be described as a vocal marathon. He talked and talked, always with fire and never briefly, and contrived to touch upon the widest conceivable range of subjects, on most of which he seemed to have fairly definite ideas…” Canadian Embassy, Rio de Janeiro, dispatch no. 248, “Visit of Fidel Castro to Brazil,” 8 May 1959, file 7-1-0 pt. 2, vol. 20782, RG 25, Library and Archives Canada (LAC), Ottawa.

59 Da Cunha, Diplomacia em Alto-Mar, p. 208.

60 Cabot diary, 21 July 1959 entry.

61 Text of Declaration of Santiago, NYT, 29 August 1959, p. 2; “Cuba to Vote Soon, Major Castro Says,” NYT, 20 August 1959, p. 5.

62 U.S. Embassy, Rio de Janeiro (Cabot), tel. no. 263, 13 August 1959, CDF 737.00/8-159, RG 59, NA.
ambassador “made a reassuring public statement denying Communist influence in the Castro entourage.”

In the fall, however, da Cunha seemed to take a more negative view of Castro’s tactics, even if he remained skeptical of, or at least unconvinced by, widespread charges by the Cuban leader’s critics (both within and outside the country) that he and his associates were loyal to and leading Cuba toward communism. Some prominent members of the initial post-Batista leadership had already resigned in protest, including President Urrutia in July, and in October an important military figure, Huber Matos, the commander of Camagüey province (and former guerrilla fighter), resigned along with fourteen other officers, denouncing “the rising pro-communist influence in the country,” including infiltration of the leadership. That in itself seemed another ominous sign, but what really seemed to alarm da Cunha was the way that Castro (who furiously quashed this protest in the bud, personally arresting Matos), reacted to another event that occurred soon after, on October 21, when a Florida-based Cuban exile overflew Havana in a civilian plane from which he dropped anti-Castro leaflets. Though the flight was unarmed, two civilians were killed and 45 wounded when frenetic, panicky anti-aircraft machine-gun and grenade fire fell to earth. That didn’t stop Castro, in a speech to a mass rally, from blaming the “bombardment” for the casualties and angrily castigating the United States. Castro’s demagogic behavior, cabled da Cunha, “assumes an aspect of major gravity, considering that this is the first time that he uses a conscious falsification to rally the people and for the orientation of their politics. It remains to be seen if the present attitude is


64 On these episodes, see, e.g., Thomas, *The Cuban Revolution*, pp. 466-468.
only the fruit of the emotional temperament of the Prime Minister or if, as resulting from the defeat of the anticommunist current, Fidel Castro will begin to adhere to the tendency of the pro-communists, such as Guevara and Raul Castro, seeking to aggravate the political tension between Cuba and the United States of America."

In November, as relations with Washington further deteriorated—and the feeling was mutual; by then top figures in the Eisenhower Administration had concluded that its aim should be to topple Castro, not reach an accommodation with him—Havana sought to mend its ties elsewhere in the hemisphere. In particular, seeking better relations with Kubitschek, and aware of Rio’s interest in maintaining decent terms with the revolutionary rulers (who retained great popularity on the left throughout Latin America, including Brazil), Castro’s foreign minister, Raul Roa, dangled an invitation to his Brazilian counterpart, Horacio Lafer, to visit Havana for high-level discussions.

But da Cunha counseled strongly against any such trip. Noting the “grave internal crisis of the revolutionary government” and rising political tension—especially since the “mysterious disappearance” of Army commander Camilio Cienfuegos, giving rise to disparate rumors, e.g., that Fidel had suffered a nervous breakdown—he judged that, at least for the moment, the Havana leaders lacked the “receptivity” for any relaxation of tensions with the United States and, on the contrary, appeared determined to “maintain agitation in its relations with this country.” Accepting Roa’s invitation now could encourage this tendency. Well aware of Brazil’s proclivity to seek a role as a mediator of hemispheric conflicts involving Latin

---

65 See Brazilian Embassy, Havana (da Cunha) telegram, [approx. 21 October 1959], repeated in Brazilian Foreign Ministry to Brazilian Embassy, Washington, Carta-Telegram (CT) 317, 6 November 1959, AMRE, courtesy of Roberto Baptista. See also da Cunha, *Diplomacia em Alto-Mar*, p. 207.
America, he urged caution until both sides’ stands had become clearer. Replying promptly, Lafer accepted his ambassador’s advice, remarking that he did not believe in the receptivity of either side in the US-Cuban conflict, and therefore did not want to create the impression that Brazil sought to butt in as a mediator. (Learning of this exchange—perhaps by intercepting Brazilian cables?—the CIA commented approvingly that “Lafer’s apparent decision not to go to Cuba at this time seems indicative of a growing disapproval of Castro’s excessive methods, an attitude which is becoming apparent in other Latin American countries.”)

In January, as Castro consolidated control and turned up the “arrogant, insolent, and provocative” (in the words of the US ambassador in Havana, Philip W. Bonsal) anti-U.S. rhetoric—and as, in Washington, CIA officers drafted plans to organize anti-Castro exiles into a fighting force to mount an invasion—Cuban-American relations sank further. To protest Castro’s “stepped-up campaign of calumny,” and signs of growing communist influence, Eisenhower (who by now considered Castro a “mad man”) recalled Ambassador Bonsal. After Ike made a public statement expressing concerns over recent Cuban developments, Washington now turned formally to da Cunha and his Argentine colleague, Julio Amoedo, to relay Eisenhower’s words to Castro and make what efforts they could to calm the situation—in effect, to mediate between Washington and Havana. “It would be my hope,” Bonsal cabled his deputy,

---

68 CIA, Current Intelligence Weekly Review, 19 November 1959, DDRS.
still in Havana, “that these two influential Ambassadors might advise their GOC [Government of Cuba] contacts and particularly those close to Castro to react soberly and calmly to what may well be final opportunity avoid serious consequences resulting U.S. public and official reaction to insults our Government and high officials have suffered at Castro’s hands and in GOC press.”\(^71\)

Leitão da Cunha, on receiving the statement, “offered to be as helpful as possible” but said he had little contact with Cuban leaders, who “don’t want any advice.” He thought it would not be so bad for them to miss Bonsal for “a little while,” and in general attributed their behavior not to communist doctrine or clandestine Soviet directives (as some were charging) but more irrational factors related to emotion and personality:

Brazilian Ambassador likened Cuban attitude toward US to spite of a child against parent or teacher which could lead him even to destroying his prized possessions. This theory was further supported he believed by observation that present GOC leaders, however naturally intelligent, are immature, inexperienced and like children playing with fire arms. Situation he feels calls for psycho-analytical approach.\(^72\)

The late January 1960 approach to Castro through the envoys of Brazil and Argentina in Havana opened a period of intense mediation efforts involving both those countries to somehow prevent the US-Cuban confrontation from deepening and, they feared, escalating into an even worse crisis—both in Latin America and in the wider Cold War. Brazil’s role (and hence da Cunha’s) came into focus in late February, when Eisenhower visited Brazil and discussed the Cuban situation, among other issues, with

---


\(^72\) US Embassy, Habana (Braddock), tel. no. 1772, 6 pm, 26 January 1960, ibid., doc. 439.
President Kubitschek and his top advisers. While clearly within the U.S. sphere of influence, and a nominal ally in the cold war, Kubitschek, Brazil’s ambitious leader since 1956, reflected Latin American resentment at Washington for its overwhelming focus on confronting communism in Europe and Asia, losing interest in South America after the hopes raised by FDR’s “Good Neighbor” policy and cooperation during World War II.\(^73\)

The grumbling was particularly acute among Brazilians, who had been expected that sending a contingent of soldiers to fight in Europe alongside U.S. troops would bring dividends of enhanced postwar political and economic relations with the United States, only to be repeatedly disappointed.\(^74\) To break this pattern, and warning that it represented an alternative to precisely the sort of angry social and economic discontent and instability displayed in Cuba and toward US Vice-President Richard M. Nixon during his tour of South America (particularly when his motorcade was attacked in Caracas, Venezuela), Kubitschek had in 1958 proposed “Operation Pan-America,” a massive program of US aid (akin to the Marshall Plan for Europe) to promote development in South America; though the Eisenhower Administration until its final months gave OPA the cold shoulder, preferring to focus on private investment rather than aid, JFK would embrace the idea and revamp it as his own “Alliance for Progress.”\(^75\)


Seeing the Cuban situation as reinforcing his case for OPA, and seeking higher visibility in hemispheric affairs, Kubitschek jumped at the chance to play middleman between Castro and Eisenhower. Before Eisenhower’s visit, he called in the U.S. ambassador to offer Brazil’s services, perhaps sending a special emissary to Havana and Washington; likening Fidel to a “young student who didn’t appreciate the consequence of his acts,” he indicated he was “thoroughly disgusted with what was going on in Cuba, that Raul was certainly a commie and that Cuba was disturbing the whole Caribbean.” At the same time—claiming to have evidence that “our possible mediation could be of great utility”—he recalled da Cunha to Rio for consultations. In early February, before leaving Havana, da Cunha saw (after three days of efforts) a very conciliatory-sounding Foreign Minister Roa, who welcomed the notion of Brazilian mediation and asserted that Cuba was fully disposed to resume “normal diplomacy” and negotiations with the United States.

However, just as the Cubans started to make nice noises, and Kubitschek prepared to broach Brazilian mediation personally to Eisenhower, Washington began backing away. The same day Roa saw da Cunha, February 4, Soviet deputy prime minister Anastas I. Mikoyan arrived in Cuba for a ten-day visit that seemed to stimulate the budding Soviet-Cuban romance and reinforce the Eisenhower administration’s secret determination to

---


77 Brazilian Embassy, Havana (da Cunha), tel. 25, 4 February 1960, 920.(22)(24h)—ANEXO Secreto—920(22)(00)—RELACIÔNES POLITICAS E DIPLOMATICAS—EE.UU.-UNIVERSO,” AMRE.
plot Castro’s downfall as rapidly as possible—rather than seriously explore negotiations with him.\textsuperscript{78}

That ambivalence was apparent when Ike and his aides discussed the Cuban issue with Brazilian officials during his late February visit. When Foreign Minister Lafer, in his meeting with Secretary of State Christian Herter, related da Cunha’s supposition “that Castro, once he had shown Cuba’s independence of the U.S., would then turn on the Communists,” Herter’s assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs, Roy Rubottom, skeptically observed that “this might not happen and involved great dangers.”\textsuperscript{79} In his session with Eisenhower, Kubitschek lamented “Communist infiltration in Cuba” before asking whether he would welcome a Brazilian “effort at mediation or good offices” (pointing out that “Castro’s sister\textsuperscript{80} had taken refuge in the Brazilian Embassy during the Batista regime so that the Brazilian Ambassador was in a particularly good position to talk to Castro”). Politely but vaguely, Eisenhower replied that “anything the Latin American nations could do to bring Castro to a more amenable frame of mind would be helpful.”\textsuperscript{81}


\textsuperscript{80} \textit{FRUS, 1958-1960}, Vol. V, p. 764 n4 identifies this sister as his half-sister Lidia Castro, but it may well refer to Juanita Castro, who took refuge in the Brazilian Embassy in the final year of Batista and became close to Amb. da Cunha’s wife. She left the embassy on 2 January 1959, after the revolution’s triumph, but later became disillusioned with her brother due to his increasing communist ties, secretly agreed to spy for the CIA (after being connected by Mrs. da Cunha), and publicly denounced her brother after she left Cuba in 1964. (See below.)

Unlike U.S. officials, who were deeply alarmed by Mikoyan’s visit to Cuba and its implications, da Cunha found in it reassurance for his own view that Castro and his top associates were not committed communists, let alone Soviet stooges. After lingering in Havana to observe the Soviet’s stay, he had returned to Rio in time to for Eisenhower’s visit.82 While in Brazil, in late February, he confided his views to a close friend, a French priest, who in turn conveyed them to Paris’ embassy. As reported by French ambassador Bernard Hardion, who had known da Cunha when they were both posted in Madrid, Brazil’s ambassador to Cuba believed that

1) Fidel Castro is certainly not a Communist, and he is determined to make sure that his country does not become subservient to Moscow.

2) Fidel Castro is driven by an ardent and praiseworthy desire to raise, by any means, even revolutionary, the standard of living of his people. The resources of the country justify in any case such an ambition, but this liberation program can only succeed to the extent that the Cuban economy can free itself from the grip of the United States, which is significant. He is currently focused on this economic liberation, and in particular with agrarian reform.

3) M. Mikoyan’s trip has placated the communist extremists such as Raul Castro and “Che” Guevara. It also strengthened Cuba’s international standing. But Fidel Castro is not interested in further developing his country’s relations with the USSR. He will, instead, now look to the United States and take a less intransigent attitude toward the latter.

4) The Cuban revolution could have important repercussions throughout Latin America and Brazil should follow it with as much sympathy as interest….83


In early March, before returning to Havana, da Cunha also explained his thinking at some length to the U.S. ambassador to Brazil, John M. Cabot. Cabot had heard from Foreign Minister Lafer that da Cunha was “convinced Fidel is not a communist and will swing to greater moderation once he has established that he is independent – also that Fidel likes Phil Bonsal.” Fearing that “Vasco is a bit starry eyed,” the American invited him to lunch to hear his views directly. Blaming Castro’s “diatribes” on his determination to “break the Cuban sense of dependence on the U.S.,” da Cunha asserted that “Fidel and Co. didn’t receive Mikoyan enthusiastically” and described “even Raul and Che [as] naïve radicals with communist ideas, but [who] wouldn’t accept Soviet orders.”

Da Cunha told Cabot that “he had long debated in his own mind as to whether Fidel Castro was Communist or pro-Communist, or was merely an independent radical,” but the Mikoyan visit had convinced him of the latter. In particular, he recalled Mikoyan’s speech at the opening of the Soviet trade exhibition. Authorities permitted “only about a thousand” to attend, mostly communist party faithful, which “made it evident that the Cuban Government had no interest in having the non-Communist revolutionaries around,” and members of the government present applauded Mikoyan “politely if not enthusiastically” until the Soviet urged confiscating foreign property without compensation—“at which point they stopped applauding until the end of the speech.” The Brazilian also said that, as they toured the exhibit, Fidel and Mikoyan “argued about housing in Cuba and Russia.” Putting this together with Cuba’s renewed expression of interest in negotiating with Washington (as Roa had conveyed to him in early February), da Cunha surmised that “this was Fidel’s way of securing a sufficiently independent position” before bargaining with the United States, probably within

84 Cabot diary, 2 (“starry-eyed”), 7 (Mikoyan, Raul, Che) March 1960 entries.
the next few months, since he might worry that his “position might be undermined” by a U.S.-Soviet agreement at the impending East-West summit in Paris in May.

“Leitao da Cunha said there were no identifiable communists in Fidel’s immediate entourage,” Cabot recorded, an assertion hardly compatible with Washington’s views. Still, the U.S. diplomat related the Brazilian’s “strong approval” of the U.S. policy of “restraint” toward Cuba (though he wished Washington would do a better job of stopping exile flights from Florida to attack Cuban sugarcane crops), and his praise of Bonsal as “just the man for the job with his understanding and tact, despite the rough time he had had.” Confining to his personal diary his fear that his friend Vasco had grown “starry-eyed” over Fidel, Cabot concluded his memorandum of the conversation (which would be circulated to superiors) with a firm endorsement of da Cunha’s basic political orientation and reliability:

Leitao da Cunha has long been (I understand) close and friendly with Fidel and his family since members of the family took refuge at the Brazilian Embassy while Fidel was carrying on his revolution. He may, of course, be mistaken in this view, and he is fully aware of this himself. I have no doubt, however, that he speaks as a person who is pro-American and reasonably conservative.  

On returning to Havana, da Cunha resumed his efforts, in cooperation with Amoedo, his Argentine colleague, to promote some form of reconciliation between the Cuban leadership and the United States. On March 17, a day after seeing Roa, he delivered a message to this effect from Kubitschek to Cuban President Osvaldo Dorticós. In response, the Cuban earnestly expressed interest in reopening negotiations with Washington “on the basis of good faith and confidence. He assured me desired sincerely to arrive at an understanding, but was not disposed to accept impositions.”

---

85 Cabot-Da Cunha memcon, 7 March 1960, CDF 737.00, box 1600, RG 59.
Dorticós did not formally request Brazil’s mediation or good offices, da Cunha judged he had received sufficient “requisites” to coax the United States into talks. Thus armed, he left the next day to rendezvous with Foreign Minister Lafer in Washington, where he could convey the news to senior U.S. officials, in the form of a memorandum of the talk with Cuba’s president.

In one sense, the moment seemed auspicious: Eisenhower had just decided to send Bonsal back to Havana, offering an authoritative channel of communications in the Cuban capital, and interlocutor to the Brazilian and Argentine diplomats who were trying to play matchmaker between the Americans and Castro. Secretly, however, the Eisenhower Administration took a fateful step that effectively negated any seeming interest in exploring a diplomatic accommodation with Castro: On March 17, in addition to okaying Bonsal’s return—and the same day that, in Havana, da Cunha secured Dorticós’ expression of interest in negotiations—Eisenhower also approved the CIA’s plan, presented by director Allen W. Dulles, to overthrow the Cuban government using a para-military force of anti-Castro Cuban exiles who would be covertly organized, financed, armed, and trained by the United States, and replace it with a regime “more devoted to the true interests of the Cuban people and more acceptable to the U.S.” Eisenhower said “he knows of no better plan for dealing with this situation.”

---

86 Brazilian Embassy, Havana (da Cunha), tel. 52, 17 March 1960, 920.(22)(24h)—ANEXO Secreto—920(22)(00)—RELACIÓNES POLITICAS E DIPLOMATICAS—EE.UU.-UNIVERSO,” AMRE.
87 US Embassy, Havana (Braddock), tel. no. 2430, 18 March 1960, CDF 601.3237, box 1107, RG 59, NA.
88 On Eisenhower’s decision to return Bonsal, taken on 17 March 1960 and announced the next day, see, e.g., memorandum of conversation with the president (and Herter), 17 March 1960, FRUS, 1958-60, vol. V, doc. 484.
89 See “A Program of Covert Action Against the Castro Regime,” 16 March 1960, and “Memorandum of a Conference with the President,” 2:30 p.m., 17 March 1960, FRUS, 1958-60, Vol. V, docs. 481 and 496.
Needless to say, the two senior U.S. officials who received Lafer and da Cunha, Secretary of State Christian Herter and Assistant Secretary Roy Rubottom, both fully informed on the plans that a year later would produce the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion, did not breath a word about the covert action program, but instead gave the Brazilians a polite, noncommittal reception. On March 18, with da Cunha in transit, Lafer called on Eisenhower at the White House, and amidst a pleasant exchange of compliments and impressions Rubottom thanked Kutbitschek for his offer to mediate between the US and Cuba, but pointedly noted that Washington “intended to pursue its problems with Cuba through regular bilateral channels.” Nevertheless, at dinner that evening, Lafer handed Herter the memorandum from his ambassador in Havana conveying Dorticós’ conciliatory comments about opening negotiations, and the next morning, at the Brazilian embassy, da Cunha personally described his exchanges with the Cuban leaders to Rubottom. The assistant secretary, however, was distinctly unimpressed—both with the message and its Brazilian bearer.

Rubottom heard out da Cunha’s account of his recent conversations with Roa and Dorticós, both of whom had “stressed” their government’s desire for “normal” relations with the United States, while requesting that Washington control the “aggressive” actions of Florida-based exiles and be willing to discuss unilateral American actions (e.g., re sugar), even as they considered Cuba’s actions, such as expropriations. Taking the same tack as with Lafer the day before, the assistant secretary expressed thanks for Brazil’s

---

90 Memorandum of Conversation, “The Brazilian Foreign Minister’s Call on The President,” 18 March 1960, “Brazil (ARA Files)” folder, box 1, Bureau of Inter-American Affairs, Subject Files of the Assistant Secretary 1959-1962, Lots 62D418 & 64D15, RG 59.

91 See Memorandum of Conversation, “Conversation at Brazilian Embassy,” 19 March 1960, ibid.
well-intentioned efforts but “made clear that, appreciative as we were, we felt that it behooved Cuba and the United States themselves to undertake to conduct their relations on a bilateral basis and that we did not feel it possible for any third country to participate in this effort.” Moreover, he added, Washington remained unsure of the “real locus of power,” and noted that any progress achieved with Roa or Dorticós could easily be reversed by a “provocative attack” by Fidel, Raul, or Che. Rubottom added that U.S. officials were “leaving no stone unturned to enforce” laws controlling actions by exiles in Florida or elsewhere, and in a further attempt at deflection, denied any parallel between US actions on sugar (which were mandated by Congress, in any case), and Cuban expropriations that violated international practice and law.

Undeterred and undeflected, and to Rubottom’s evident annoyance, da Cunha “seemed to understand the U.S. point of view explained by me,” yet “persisted in attempting to interpret the Cuban point of view,” e.g., Havana’s (correct) belief that the “United States, by its actions, has demonstrated that it hopes that the anti-Castro Cubans will be successful in overthrowing the government.” In his memo of the conversation, Rubottom recorded his first, distinctly suspicious impression of da Cunha:

(My first quick judgment of Ambassador Cunha is that, while he would probably follow the instructions laid down by his own government, he is an opportunist and probably gives satisfaction to the Cuban government officials with whom he speaks, far from standing firm in defense of the principles which Brazil and the United States share, at least in theory.)

92 Ibid.
Obviously Rubottom saw no point in gratuitously alienating the Brazilians and kept such views to himself, especially since he now knew that the course of working covertly to overthrow Castro had already been chosen.

Whether da Cunha sensed Rubottom’s disapproval (or cared if he did) is unknown, but the Brazilian resumed working towards a US-Cuban reconciliation once he returned to Havana. Although Bonsal was now back in the city, his relations with Fidel and the government remained chilly, and a new note of mutual bitterness had entered the relationship over Fidel Castro’s angry charge that the United State was responsible for the explosion, on March 4 in Havana port, of the French ship the Coubre, carrying Belgian weapons, killing 75 dock workers and wounding 200. (The source of this mysterious blast in Havana harbor, like that of the Maine, has never been conclusively proven.\(^{93}\) As Hugh Thomas later judged, on that day, “all chance of a rapprochement between the U.S. and Cuba ended, probably by an accident.”\(^{94}\)

Still, on behalf of their respective governments, da Cunha and Amoedo kept up their efforts through the spring and summer of 1960, shuttling between high Cuban officials, including Fidel, and Bonsal, trying to bring them and their countries closer together. Over that period, however, da Cunha’s view of Castro began to harden, both in terms of personal respect and judgment of his political orientation and intention.

Initially, he was still wrestling with the subject. In late March, the French ambassador in Havana, Roger Robert du Gardier, sent a lengthy analysis of his Brazilian

---

\(^{93}\) I asked Fidel Castro about this event at a March 2001 conference in Havana, prompting a long and impassioned reply and months of follow-up inquiries from Cuban officials seeking further evidence on the topic.

colleague’s position that may offer into his insight at that juncture. Upon receiving the report (noted above) of da Cunha’s comments to a French priest in Brazil a month earlier, forwarded from the French ambassador in Rio, du Gardier strongly disputed the Brazilian’s contentions that Castro was “certainly not a communist,” would resist subservience to Moscow, and still was likely to turn towards more positive relations with Washington.95 The French diplomat began his dispatch to Paris by praising da Cunha—“a very smart man and I value his intellectual honesty and insight”—but insisted that his “judgment” in this specific case had been “impaired by more sentimental than intellectual reasons” and recounted how he had developed strong feelings during the revolution:

“Having arrived in Havana two years before Batista’s downfall, my Brazilian colleague, rightly exasperated by the governing style of the dictator-sergeant and his ministers, immediately sympathized with the insurgents of the Sierra, provided them with all the moral aid he could muster and even provided asylum to several of them in the last months of 1958. He thus views himself, if not as their protector, [then] at least as their most intimate foreign friend.” Moreover, he added, despite maintaining cordial personal ties with Bonsal, da Cunha, like many Brazilians and Latin Americans, resented U.S. economic predominance in the hemisphere.

Only by understanding “this ‘moral climate’ that is personal to M. da Cunha” could one grasp his views, du Gardier argued—yet he sensed that even as this staunch defender of Castro outwardly clung to his “convictions,” they in fact had been “very

shaken.” In January, he recalled, the Brazilian had “strongly defended” their Spanish
colleague when he was expelled by Castro, and several times recently,

he shared with some of us his disappointment and concern as to the recent evolution of his
fidelista friends in regard to foreign policy. He still wants to believe that Fidel himself is
not Communist, he also constantly tries to convince us – and likely himself by the same
token – that the revolutionary government of Cuba is essentially looking for a satisfactory
arrangement with the United States, and that its pro-Soviet and anti-American statements
are either only a ‘bluff’ or maybe even a sort of ‘opening stand’ before the start of official
negotiations with Washington; based on the comments he made to me recently, I am
nonetheless convinced that my Brazilian colleague’s convictions have been very shaken,
but that he hesitates to give up on them considering the very strong position he took in
favor of Fidel and his partisans in the last three years.

Laying out at some length the evidence that had led him to conclude that “the Cuban
regime is far more tied to Moscow and Beijing than M. da Cunha wants to admit,” du
Gardier noted that many of his American and (West) European colleagues also differed
with the Brazilian, “supposing that he is still profoundly convinced as he says he is” that
his “young friends of the Sierra” had still preserved their freedom of maneuver on the
international stage” rather than swung firmly towards alignment with the communist
world.

Certainly Bonsal fell into that category. On April 8, the U.S. ambassador in Havana
sent Assistant Secretary Rubottom a mixed assessment of da Cunha (bold-faced words
originally censored when the document was declassified in 1998, but released when it
was reviewed in 2007): “So far as the Brazilian Ambassador is concerned, I had a long
talk with him yesterday. He is a good friend of mine, but I am afraid that he talks out of
both sides of his mouth, and that he is very much under the influence of his active and
opinionated wife who regards herself as a cross between a mother hen and Joan of Arc in relation to the revolution and its leaders.” Bonsal “went into great detail with him about the very serious view we take of the [Cuban Government’s] antics,” and da Cunha “appeared to agree entirely.”96

Bonsal hoped da Cunha would relay at least some of these views “to the proper quarters,” and da Cunha had had some recent chances to communicate with top-level Cubans in connection with a high-profile Brazilian-Cuban interaction—the visit to Havana of Janio Quadros, an opposition presidential candidate who that October would triumph in elections to succeed Juscelino Kubitschek. American officials were “disgusted” and “disappoint[ed]” by Quadros’ visit, regarding it as blatant fawning over Castro to appeal to Brazilian leftist and “extreme nationalist” voters.97

Actually, when Quadros had asked da Cunha’s advice about the idea of visiting Cuba, the ambassador had recommended that he go, hoping the experience might moderate the enthusiasm of Quadros and his party, the UDN, for Cuba’s revolutionary government.98 When the Brazilian politician arrived in late March, together with a large entourage (including Afonso Arinos, later his foreign minister), Vasco and Virginia put out all the stops to organize a party for the visiting delegation. As a British diplomat

96 Letter, Bonsal to Rubottom, 9 April 1960, folder 9, box 1, Bonsal papers, LC.
97 Quadros’ visit to Cuba struck Cabot, the US ambassador to Brazil, as “a cheap political maneuver which can only rock the inter-American boat [and] leaves me more disgusted than ever,” and Bonsal was “somewhat disgusted at the way in which the Cuban revolution is being made a football of Brazilian politics.” Cabot diary, 5 March 1960 entry; letter, Bonsal to Rubottom letter, 9 April 1960, folder 9, box 1, Bonsal papers, LC. Secretary of State Herter found it “disappointing” that Quadros had, in Cuba, “publicly stated his support of agrarian reform.” Memorandum of conversation, “Subject: The Cuban Situation,” 1 April 1960, CDF 611.37/4-160, box 1223, RG 59. “extreme nationalist”: Amcongen Sao Paulo, dispatch no. 359, 4 April 1940, CDF 752.00/4-460, box 1574, RG 59.
98 Da Cunha, Diplomacia em Alto-mar, p. 220.
recorded, “the Brazilians gave a cocktail party in his [Quadros’] honour which was attended by the largest collection of Revolutionary beards, fellow-traveling intellectuals and members of the P.S.P. [Partido Socialista Popular; the pro-Moscow Cuban communist party] to be seen inside any foreign Mission in Havana for some time.”

Behind the scenes, however, there was considerable uncertainty, even suspense, about the arrival of one important invited guest: Fidel. Da Cunha had invited him, along with Raul and Che, but (as he later recalled) Fidel sent word that he would refuse the invitation, because the ambassador was giving asylum to his “enemies.” But when Guevara (who was coming) heard this, he immediately telephoned Fidel—traveling some 200 kilometers from the capital—and, not mincing words, demanded he attend: Fidel came late, but he came. The party officially lasted from 7-9 p.m., but Fidel “turned up well after 10 p.m. and stayed until after midnight.” Then, around one in the morning, he was said to have returned “in a state of tremendous agitation,” saying he had lost his pistol at the party. (Evidently, da Cunha later recalled, he had forgotten it on a bathroom table, from which it was stolen.) A search proved fruitless, but the next day “a heavily ornamented revolver of immense size”—in fact, a “beautiful Parabellum-Pistol” (Lugar), with a dedication from Anastas Mikoyan—was returned by one of the asylum-seekers in the embassy to da Cunha, who had it returned to Fidel.

---


100 The account of this party (and the pistol incident) comes from da Cunha, Diplomacia em Alto-Mar, p. 220; and Sutherland to Edmonds, 7 May 1960, cited above.
Shortly after the Quadros festivities, the da Cunhas hosted for dinner at their swank residence several leading members of the communist PSP, including Carlos Rafael Rodriguez, further evidence of the Brazilian’s range of contacts.\(^\text{101}\)

Those contacts included Bonsal, of course, and around this time da Cunha brought together the US ambassador—back in town, but still isolated from contacts with the top Cuban leaders—and the managing editor of *Prensa Libre*, the new state-sponsored news agency. To the American’s pleasure (as he reported to Rubottom is one of his chatty letters), the resulting conversation became “a long and gratifying talk regarding the Communist menace, the ideas of Christian civilization which bind our countries together etc. etc.” The experienced seemed to slightly soften Bonsal’s latest appraisal of his Brazilian colleague (who was, he related, “not currently in the best of health”): an experienced diplomat (unlike Amoedo), with a “considerable intellect,” still influenced by Virginia, his wife, “a dominant, energetic person of strongly pro-Castro tendencies,” and also by his assessment of Cuba’s fluctuating role in Brazil’s domestic politics. The ambassador also “makes rather a pose of taking a highly philosophical attitude about Castro’s verbal excesses”—which of course made him, in the eyes of U.S. officials like Rubottom, a Castro-apologist. Bonsal’s bottom line: da Cunha, who still “maintains contacts with all sort of people” (including communists), was still “useful in that occasionally he can convey my thinking and attitude to some of the people in the Government.”\(^\text{102}\)

Around this time, possibly as a result of such contacts—some perhaps in connection with the Quadros visit, others undertaken independently—da Cunha began to sound an

\(^{101}\) Sutherland to Edmonds, 7 May 1960.

\(^{102}\) Philip W. Bonsal to Roy R. Rubottom, Jr., 22 April 1960, CDF 611.37/4-2260, box 1223, RG 59.
increasingly alarmist tone about the extent of communist and Soviet-bloc infiltration of the Cuban leadership, and he also began to feel growing doubts about Castro and some of those in his retinue. In late April, US officials learned that da Cunha had reported an “intense struggle” within Castro’s government and that the situation regarding communist influence was “fast approaching [a] show-down.” If Castro did not “repudiate” Communist support in his highly-anticipated upcoming May Day speech, he warned, then “then conclusions must be reached [that] Communists have gained [the] upper hand” within the power structure. U.S. officials (both the ambassador in Rio and then the CIA) noted that Itamaraty took this assessment “very seriously” (was “especially alarmed,” the CIA said) considering da Cunha’s prior “consistent support” for Castro.103

Of course, Castro didn’t repudiate communist support on May 1, 1960, an inauspicious political omen that may have complemented the negative personal feelings toward the Cuban leader da Cunha apparently came away with after an incident the night before. On April 30, da Cunha and his wife had attended, along with about 500 guests, in the venerable cathedral in Old Havana, the wedding of Emma Castro Ruz, Fidel’s youngest sister (the Brazilian ambassador was a witness for the bride). According to a newspaper report, Fidel’s arrival interrupted and even overshadowed the ceremony; he showed up 20 minutes late, “dressed in his campaign fatigue uniform with shirt open at the throat, and wore sidearms,” and stood near the altar as the noise from chanting supporters outside (“Viva Fidel!”) “filled the Cathedral.”104 Word fast spread that Castro’s crude conduct had deeply offended da Cunha, a model of propriety. As the

103 US Embassy, Rio de Janeiro (Cabot), tel. no. 1669, 28 April 1960, CDF 737.00/4-2860, box 1602, RG 59; CIA, Current Intelligence Digest (Supplement), 16 May 1960, CIA FOIA.
British ambassador wrote a colleague, “even the Brazilian Ambassador, Senor Vasco da Cunha who is normally a strong protagonist of the Revolutionary regime here was shocked at Fidel Castro’s disrespectful behaviour….”\textsuperscript{105}

Naturally, da Cunha did not let such personal feelings interfere with his mission, along with Amoedo, of attempting to mediate between Washington (e.g., Bonsal) and the Cuban leadership, and his hardening judgment that the communists were gaining the “upper hand” in the leadership only intensified his determination to make every last attempt to pull Fidel back from the dark side. The Amoedo-da Cunha effort to arrest the deterioration in US-Cuban relations effectively climaxed on the night of May 11, when the Argentine ambassador hosted an unprecedented nocturnal meeting (“men’s dinner”) between Fidel (accompanied by Foreign Minister Roa) and twelve hemispheric ambassadors—eleven Latins (from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Peru, and Venezuela) plus the Canadian—that lasted from midnight until nearly dawn.\textsuperscript{106}

Mealtime talk dwelt on hunting and fishing (Castro, in an “amiable mood,” “enthusiastically” discussed the latter), then moved to more serious political topics. Castro blamed the impasse with Washington on U.S. hostility and reluctance to accept

\textsuperscript{105} I.J.M. Sutherland, British Embassy, Havana, to R.H.G. Edmonds, American Dept., FO, 7 May 1960, FO 371/148199, UKNA.

\textsuperscript{106} The account of this meeting in succeeding paragraphs (and all quotations) are from three sources: Vasco da Cunha’s own account of the meeting, Vasco Tristão Leitão da Cunha to Foreign Minister Horacio Lafer, letter no. 110, 12 May 1960, in MDB—HAVANA—OFICIOS REC—1960-1961 (CX 49), AMRE; Philip W. Bonsal’s account, based on Amoedo’s notes, in Bonsal to Rubottom, 12 May 1960, folder 1, box 2, Bonsal papers, LC; and Canadian ambassador Allan Anderson’s account: Canadian Ambassador Havana (Anderson) to Secretary of State for External Affairs, Ottawa, Despatch No. D-329, 16 May 1960, file 10224-40, pt. 8, vol. 5351, RG 25, LAC; “men’s dinner” was Amoedo’s description to Anderson.
authentic Cuban independence, but offered an opening by asking for solidarity from fellow countries of the hemisphere and asserting (according to the account da Cunha cabled home afterwards) that “Cuba cannot and will not divorce itself from the American Continent.” According to one diplomat present (the Canadian ambassador), in the midst of a lengthy and rambling discourse (he “went on, and on, without saying anything very new or striking”), Castro said “words to the effect that Cuba would not ‘secede from the American family”—at which point da Cunha “broke in to welcome this,” calling it “the most important and valuable thing that had yet been said.” The Brazilian, according to his own account, stressed the importance of that statement, mentioning Canada and his own country as examples of nations that, despite differences with most of Latin America, had come to appreciate the importance of maintaining “inter-American solidarity.”

Castro, “possibly a shade taken aback at being taken at his word so promptly and so vigorously,” began to hedge and veered onto a tangent about the revolution’s vital importance—perhaps implying, the Canadian thought, that this aim superseded any other consideration—but did not explicitly retract his statement.

Castro had affirmed that Cuba’s revolution would “not obey any foreign influence,” and no one apparently mentioned the elephant in the room of growing Soviet influence until Columbia’s envoy complained that “external influences on Cuban politics” endangered the hemispheric “comprehension and solidarity” that Castro claimed to seek. At this Fidel “almost blew his top” (as Amoedo reported to Bonsal), retorting that the real “external influence” from which Cuba had suffered came from the United States. Intervening to try to calm the situation after his Columbian colleague had “put the finger in the wound,” da Cunha “had quite a job smoothing [Castro] down,” as one
ambassador present related. Several ambassadors, including da Cunha, Amoedo, and the
Ecuadorean (Virgilio Chiriboga), stressed that the concern over growing Soviet influence
came from genuine supporters of Cuban interests, and the last-named spoke with “such
sincerity and eloquence,” with the evident support of the other ambassadors, that Fidel
seemed “visibly shaken” and “plucked his beard” when he mildly replied. Though he
didn’t use the phrase in his contemporaneous report, da Cunha had the impression that
Castro had committed himself to a “position of equidistance” between the
superpowers. ¹⁰⁷

The meeting seemed to end cordially, around 5 a.m., with Castro thanking those
present for the dialogue and suggesting it be continued. On his way out, the Canadian
ambassador told da Cunha he had just witnessed “the first constructive manifestation
since his arrival in Cuba” the previous fall.

Da Cunha hoped the sight of thirteen hemispheric representatives unanimously
decrying “any extra-continental influence” and urging limits to the US-Cuban hostility
would have a salutary impact on Fidel, but he cabled warily that one “had to wait for
actions to judge the sincerity of his enunciated propositions.” In short order, events
would make clear that the event, which would not be repeated, had failed to have any
palpable impact on the direction of Castro’s revolution, or to arrest the deterioration of
US-Cuban relations. In fact, quite the contrary: As da Cunha later recalled, if it had any
effect at all, the conversation only confirmed the sense of mutual incomprehension,
reinforcing Fidel’s determination to align Cuba with the communist world. “He felt that
the majority was in favor of a rapprochement with the United States, in a manner that

¹⁰⁷ 900.1(00) – Política Internacional de (10) a (98) – 1951/66, AMRE, copy in MB/NSA.
confirmed his antipathy toward the reactionaries of the continent. He felt that the danger of the continent was the United States.”

(In Washington, lamenting the meal for a different reason, Rubottom considered the diplomats’ dinner with Castro “most unfortunate” for having fostered illusions that productive negotiations might be possible when Cuba’s government had fallen under “firm [communist] control.” In fact, he wrote Bonsal a month later, the encounter may have “resulted in a momentary setback in the form of a psychological let-up in the mounting realization around the hemisphere of the extent of the Castro menace.”)

Da Cunha’s growing fervor to promote anti-communist tendencies in Havana, reassuring to the Americans, surfaced again later in May. Even as da Cunha and Amoedo were, in fact, making little headway in attempts to get Bonsal and Castro together, they continued their contacts with leading political figures, including several who were growing disenchanted with the direction the revolutionary government was taking. The two ambassadors and their wives dined with former president Carlos Prios Sacarrás (from 1948 to March 1952, when he was overthrown by Batista) and his vice-president Guillermo Alonso Pujol. Prio was mulling a break with Castro’s government due to its “dangerous” anti-American and pro-Communist tendencies—he would finally publicly take that step eight months later—and Pujol, when he lunched with Bonsal afterwards, “was loud in his praise of the way in which the Brazilian Ambassador particularly expounded the doctrine of the Inter-American System, the Communist menace, and the

---

109 Letter, Rubottom to Bonsal, 10 June 1960, CDF 611.37/5-2461, box 1223, RG 59.
110 Philip W. Bonsal to Roy R. Rubottom, Jr., 23 May 1960, CDF 611.37/4-2260, box 1223, RG 59.
need for good relations between Cuba and the United States against a background of the course being taken by the present Cuban Government.”

As the US-Cuban confrontation intensified that summer (with Washington barring US companies from refining Cuban oil and cutting its regular quota of sugar purchases from the island), relations between Havana and Rio drifted (a late spring visit to Brazil by Dorticos had failed to warm them), da Cunha’s contacts with dissidents from Castro, including former supporters who streamed to his embassy to apply for asylum, evidently further reinforced his fears that the revolution was moving irreparably towards communism and into the Soviet bloc. In mid-July, da Cunha wangled through intermediaries a private meeting with a bedridden Fidel Castro, whom he warned that further Soviet interference in Cuba would lead to a situation where Havana confronted “not only the countries of this Continent, but all of the West.” Castro evaded a direct reply, he reported. A week later, he transmitted a detailed report on the organization of the Cuban intelligence services, based on the interrogation of an asylum-seeker resident in the embassy, formerly associated with Cuba’s G-2 organization. In a hint of closer cooperation with the United States, the Brazilian Embassy promised to “furnish [the American] embassy with any interesting information” their informant might divulge.

Da Cunha also now seemed to begin viewing sympathetically the clandestine organizing of Cuban exiles in the United States (who had opposed Batista but grown disenchanted with his successor) for a future attempt to overthrow Castro. In August, citing an

111 Philip W. Bonsal to Roy R. Rubottom, Jr., 24 May 1960, CDF 611.37/4-2260, box 1223, RG 59.
112 Brazilian Embassy, Havana (da Cunha), tel. 144, 15 July 1960, AMRE.
114 U.S. Embassy Habana embtel 790, 17 Aug 1960, CDF 737.00/8-1760, box 1605, RG 59.
unidentified informant, da Cunha also reported that a rebel army, allegedly under the command of ex-Colonel Ramón Barquín and consisting of other former supporters of Castro and his revolution who now objected to the growth of Soviet and communist influence, were preparing a training camp in the United States—the Brazilian sympathetically described the nascent force as “all convinced revolutionaries, but decided opponents of communism.”

In late July and early August 1960, as the de facto culmination of Kubitschek’s mediation efforts that year, Brazil collaborated with Mexico and Canada in an effort to ameliorate the US-Cuban dispute before an impending OAS foreign ministers meeting of consultation, scheduled for mid-August in Costa Rica. Da Cunha may have stimulated his government’s participation when he reported, on July 19, that Fidel had seemed defensive during a three-hour television appearance the night before, and suggested that recent debates in the UN Security Council and the OAS in which Havana had been isolated had served, “finally, to open the eyes of the Cuban Government to the reality of international politics.” Perhaps, Brazil’s ambassador ventured, the moment was opportune to take some action. Still, in contrast to Mexico and Canada, Brazil joined the effort dutifully yet doubtfully, correctly convinced it would go nowhere, and that’s where it went. In Washington, Secretary of State Herter politely deflected the good offices gesture, conveyed by Mexico’s ambassador, expressing “reluctance” to embrace it

115 Brazilian Embassy, Havana (da Cunha), tel. 203, 10 August 1960, AMRE.
116 Brazilian Embassy, Havana (da Cunha), tel. 158, 19 July 1960, ANEXO Secreto—920(22)(00)—RELACIÓNES POLITICAS E DIPLOMATICAS EE.UU UNIVERSO, AMRE.
117 On Canada’s internal considerations and its exchanges with the Mexican, Brazilian, U.S., and Cuban governments relating to this mediation effort, see Documents on Canadian External Relations, Vol. 27, 1960, Chapter IX, Latin America, Part 1, Cuba, accessible on-line.
in view of the impending OAS foreign ministers meeting.\footnote{See deptel 63 to U.S. Embassy, Ottawa, 28 July 1960, CDF 611.37/7-2460, box 1223, RG 59; Memcon, Mexican Ambassador Antonio Carrillo Flores-Rubottom, “Subject: Prospective Offer of Good Offices by Mexico, Brazil and Canada in the United States-Cuba Affair, 2 August 1960; Memcon, Secretary-Mexican Ambassador Antonio Carrillo Flores, “Subject: Proposed Offer of Good Offices to United States and Cuba,” 3 August 1960; Memcon, Secretary-Brazil Ambassador Walther Moreira Salles, “Subject: Offer of Brazil to Assist in Settling Disputes Between United States and Cuba,” 3 August 1960; all in CDF 611.37, box 1224, RG 59.} In Havana, da Cunha and his Mexican colleague spent two hours with Fidel Castro and Roa on August 5. The Cuban leader pronounced himself grateful and ready to cooperate, neither formally accepting nor rejecting the offer of good offices, but effectively vanquished any suitable atmosphere for talks by confiding that he intended in the next two days to nationalize all properties in Cuba remaining in U.S. hands.\footnote{Memorandum of conversation, Lafer-Cabot, 19 July 1960, in U.S. Embassy, Rio de Janeiro, dispatch no. 47, 21 July 1960, CDF 611.32/7-2160, box 1217, RG 59.}

By then, da Cunha was not the only senior Brazilian official who was, however grudgingly, concluding that Castro had been irretrievably lost to the hemisphere. In Rio, his foreign minister, Horacio Lafer, “gloomily agreed” with the U.S. ambassador that “Fidel was acting as a Communist stooge” and the problem now, after belatedly reaching this realization, was what to do about it.\footnote{Brazilian Embassy, Havana (da Cunha), message to Foreign Minister Lafer, 5 August 1960, AMRE; and Memorandum from Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs to Secretary of State for External Affairs, “Discussions with Brazil and Mexico Concerning U.S.-Cuban Relations, 11 August 1960, enclosing 10 August 1960 memorandum of 5 August 1960 conversation between Castro and Mexican and Brazilian ambassadors, Documents on Canadian External Relations, Volume #27-603. Castro soon followed through on his nationalization vow, announcing on August 7, the compulsory expropriation of 26 U.S. companies; see Canadian Embassy, Havana, tel. 73, 8 August 1960, in Documents on Canadian External Relations, Vol. #27-601.} Diplomatic and intelligence reports reaching Eisenhower indicated a mixed assessment. Most Brazilians “generally still approve of
the Castro revolution’s initially stated objectives and sympathize with its aspiration to eliminate preponderant US influence,” although all save “extreme leftists repudiate the Cuban regime’s violence, irresponsibilities and its dictatorial nature,” the American embassy in Rio judged. Only a minority of government officials espoused a “hard stand” on Cuba, with most, including Kubitschek, favoring a “cautious approach.” That meant something short of full support for Washington—unless Brazil received compensatory U.S. backing for Operation Pan America and/or other Latin American nations swung behind Washington’s position. Even more alarming, Eisenhower read a report suggesting that Kubitschek was “purposely winking at the Cuban difficulty on the basis that it gives him a pry to blackmail the US” to support OPA; in doing so the Brazilian leader was reputedly heeding the views of advisor Frederico Schmidt, who favored “a certain amount of communism in Brazil” for “bargaining purposes,” over those counseled by his foreign minister. With Lafer’s opposition to Castro still judged tenuous, Eisenhower was told, the only senior Itamaraty figure who favored firm action, political department chief Pio Correa, “stands almost isolated in the Brazilian Government.”

In mid-August, da Cunha became further disenchanted with Castro’s rule when he attended the OAS foreign ministers’ meeting in San Jose as part of the Brazilian delegation. Of course, Cuba was a hot topic, and an incident there left da Cunha furious with the Cuban official he dealt with most often. At Lafer’s behest, da Cunha met with

121 “Synopsis of State and Intelligence material reported to the President,” 10 August 1960 (reporting information read by the president on August 8), “Intelligence Briefing Notes, Vol. II (5), box 14, White House Office, Office of the Staff Secretary: Records, Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library (DDEL), Abilene, KA (courtesy of Eric Gettig).
122 “Synopsis of State and Intelligence material reported to the President, (9 August material),” 10 August 1960, ibid.
123 “Synopsis of State and Intelligence material reported to the President,” 11 August 1960, ibid.
Castro’s foreign minister, Raul Roa, urging him to take a conciliatory stand at the conference, and guaranteeing Brazilian support if he would sign the final declaration on Cuba’s behalf. Roa, however, obviously on Fidel’s instructions, not only preferred “slamming doors” to any compromise, but insulted Lafer, terming him a mere profiteer of the democratic system and a lackey of the U.S. State Department. (And Roa was just getting started; he proceeded to call Argentina’s leader “one of the worst human excrescences”!) Deeply offended at Roa—“I was very angry”—da Cunha wrote an indignant letter of protest.124 Clearly, any hope da Cunha might have entertained after the May meeting that Castro would moderate his course for the sake of hemispheric solidarity was fast fading…

By September 1960, da Cunha now clearly had shifted from regarding Castro’s rule sympathetically to viewing it as a threat to the hemisphere, and he warned his superiors accordingly. In a summary assessment for Lafer of Cuban-Brazilian relations, da Cunha began by attributing Roa’s outrageous conduct in San Jose to Cuba’s self-styled “new diplomacy,” aimed at “peoples and not to the Governments which falsely and illegitimately represent them.” In language that even U.S. officials like Rubottom would have approved (better late than never!), the ambassador observed that, since Cuba’s government evidently intended “to prosecute this orientation and to spread the revolutionary idea, obeying so the communist interest of subversion of the order in the Latin American countries, to benefit the Marxist penetration, it seems to be indispensable to draw a plan of defense against this unacceptable meddling.” Calling for a major overhaul of attitudes towards Cuba, he requested a more careful review of visa requests

124 Da Cunha, Diplomacia em Alto-Mar, p. 211.
coming from the island in order to bar “agitators, propagandists for the Revolution, and undesirables in general,” and to streamline procedures to enable to embassy to facilitate “urgent exits” for Cuban dissidents. However, recognizing the Cuban Revolution’s praiseworthy aspects (national pride, destruction of the Batista dictatorship, trying to move the country from “semi-feudal capitalism” to “social conquests of the modern world”) and its still-widespread popularity in large sectors of Latin American opinion, da Cunha stressed, “it behooves us to provide a campaign to enlighten national public opinion, making evident the expropriation of the revolutionary ideal by the communists.”

He also opposed breaking relations with Havana, preferring to maintain diplomatic outposts to serve as direct witnesses of events, especially given the inevitably “distorted” data purveyed by the revolutionary government, to assist asylum-seekers, and to provide “psychological support” as tokens of the hemisphere’s “friendly presence.” And finally, he urged that Brazil exploit the intensified concern Cuba had generated to promote Kubitschek’s Operation Pan-American, especially since Castro seemed to have finally roused Washington from its “complacent lethargy.”

Into the fall, da Cunha and his wife intensified their efforts to help asylum-seekers gain safe exits or, if refused, to live comfortably in the embassy, i.e., their own compound. Not all who sought such shelter received it, it appears. One former Cuban friend (“like a sister to me”) of the ambassador’s daughter Isabel recounted how a Castro government official, Humberto Sori Marín, who oversaw many war crimes trials, alienated Isabel by prosecuting (unfairly, she believed) her friend’s husband, and then snubbing her when she attended his trial at the Cabaña Fortress. Later, the story went, he

125 Brazilian Embassy, Havana (Da Cunha) to Foreign Minister Lafer, letter no. 211, “Relations between Brazil and Cuba,” 19 September 1960, AMRE, courtesy of Robeto Baptista.
turned against the regime. “That man got into very serious trouble and asked for asylum in the Brazilian Embassy, and they turned him down because of the incident at the Cabaña Fortress. It cost him his life, because he was caught and shot…sent before a firing squad and shot as a traitor.”  

While it is impossible to verify the details of that particular story, it authentically reflects the intense emotions surrounding the issue and the simple fact that decisions on whether or not to grant asylum could be matters of life and death.

Those who sought and did receive such help from the Brazilian ambassador included some prominent personages. In mid-October 1960, da Cunha “facilitated” the departure of a legal adviser in the president’s office, Angel Aparicio Laurencio. This “old revolutionary,” the Brazilian later remembered, had suddenly “felt the ground under his feet falter” and come to the embassy to seek asylum. Da Cunha immediately invited him for lunch, but to stay afterwards. The next day, he mentioned the case to Roa, who initially ridiculed the idea that the person was at risk, but eventually conceded he could not be certain.

After being “approached indirectly,” da Cunha also carefully managed the departure of former president Carlos Prio, who by late October was evidently “desperate again to

---

126 Laura Gomez Tarafa interview, in Marjorie Moore and Adrienne Hunter, Seven Women and the Cuban Revolution (Lugus 1997).

127 Other evidence suggests Sari Marin, after turning against Castro, left Cuba in late 1959 and did not return until he was part of a group of anti-Castro exiles who were arrested shortly after landing in Cuba with arms and explosives in mid-March 1961, after da Cunha’s term as ambassador had already ended. He was executed on April 20, 1961, during the crackdown following the Bay of Pigs invasion. Humberto Sari Marin Wikipedia entry accessed 31 March 2013.

128 U.S. Embassy, Habana embtel 1796 (Braddock), 18 Oct 1960, CDF 737.00/10-1860, box 1607, RG 59, NA.

129 Da Cunha, Diplomacia em Alto-Mar, p. 204.
get out of Cuba,” but hardly wanted to resort to dashing for asylum into the embassy. Instead, da Cunha worked to arrange an invitation for Prio to visit Brazil to speak at a suitably prestigious institution, thus providing an excuse for permission to leave the country. (Tellingly, da Cunha told the senior remaining US diplomat in Havana—Daniel Braddock, the charge d’affaires, as Bonsal had again left the country, this time for good—that he was going to Miami “for purpose [of] informing his Government…since with Russians in Habana he feels his codes may no longer be secure.” Evidently concerned, da Cunha even asked Braddock whether the US Government was taking extra precautions to protect its own coded messages “taking into account greater capability of [Cuba] these days with Russian help to break our messages.”

130) A few weeks later, in mid-November, Prio accepted an official invitation from the Brazilian Institute of Political Science in Rio to deliver a lecture—an essential step towards leaving the country, and making a public break with Castro.

According to one source, at the time a well-connected journalist in Havana who knew the da Cunhas well, another important dissident who benefitted from their support at this juncture was Manuel (Manolo) Ray Rivero, an engineer who turned activist, founder in 1957 of the Civic Resistance Movement to oppose the Batista dictatorship and initially a Castro collaborator—he had served as Minister of Public Works during the first post-revolution cabinet. But, disturbed by rising communist influence in the government, Ray resigned his post in November 1959, and by the following May he had organized an underground opposition organization, the Revolutionary Movement of the People (MRP).

130 Habana embtel 2000 (Braddock), 31 Oct 1960, CDF 737.00/10-3160, box 1607, RG 59; see also Habana airgram G-282 (Braddock), 25 Nov 1960, CDF 737.00/11-2560, RG 59.
131 Habana airgram G-267 (Braddock), 20 Nov 1960, CDF 737.00/11-2060, box 1608, RG 59.
His goal, as he made clear to the Brazilian ambassador and his wife, was not to restore a Batista-style regime (or the 1940 Constitution) but to promote continued progressive, but not communist, reforms. As his position in Cuba grew more precarious, he feared arrest or worse, and sought a means to escape the island. At this point, recalled Henry Raymont, then a United Press International (UPI) correspondent in Havana, Virginia da Cunha provided valuable aid. The ambassador’s wife, who was running “a veritable [underground] railroad” for dissidents—likely with Fidel’s acknowledge and (tacit) acquiescence—helped Ray to flee Cuba for the United States: “She put him on a boat.”

By now, November 1960, not only Ambassador da Cunha but his wife had become thoroughly disillusioned with, and even active opponents of, the Castro government, to the point of making increasing contacts with anti-Castro Cuban exiles who were already actively planning to oust him through an armed invasion, an effort that would, of course, climax at the Bay of Pigs in April 1961. He even was desperate enough to believe, for all his prior faith in hemispheric solidarity, that only the United States was in a position to help such an attempt succeed. On November 20, Braddock informed Washington (and in particular Bonsal) of da Cunha’s now almost complete conversion:

Brazilian Ambassador Leitao de [sic; da] Cunha has confided to Embassy officer that he is extremely concerned over Cuban Government’s acquisition of huge stores of arms which he is convinced are destined for Castro-type extremist groups throughout Latin America. He expressed opinion entire continent is facing grave hour and that action must be taken very quickly to remove danger posed by Castro regime. He stated he believed possible solution would present itself when Cuban opposition groups were strong enough to openly oppose Castro by force of arms, at which time OAS, or even

132 Raymont telephone interview, 1 May 2013; Raymont interview, 10 May 2013, Washington, DC. By some accounts the CIA, which had learned of Ray’s anti-regime sentiments, also assisted in his escape, hoping he could contribute to the anti-Castro émigré coalition.
UN, might be able to intervene. Ambassador declared that only Cuban opposition group which offered much hope for moment was that of Manuel (Manolo) Ray, ex-Minister Public Works. He said other countries must do their part in ridding continent of menace, but they looked to U.S. for leadership.

Prior to above conversation I was informed by Brazilian Ambassador that latter in contact with elements of Ray group.  

In fact, as noted above, da Cunha was in contact with the Ray’s MRP, and had sent Lafer a positive assessment of the group only a week earlier, describing it as a “more serious” movement with “greater possibilities of success” than other anti-Castro activists. (At JFK’s urging, Ray would join the U.S.-backed umbrella group of anti-Castro exiles, the Cuban Revolutionary Council, a few weeks before the Bay of Pigs, but he would break with the CRC shortly afterwards and go on to organize anti-Castro activities from Puerto Rico while resuming his career as an engineer.)

Da Cunha’s progressive conversion from Castro sympathizer to increasingly firm opponent reflected broader Brazilian tendencies both in the government and in public opinion, and undoubtedly had some minor influence in promoting them, at least within Itamaraty. In late 1960, a foreign diplomatic observer in Rio judged that, despite some lingering “strains of sympathy” for Cuba’s revolution, “by early this year Fidel had pretty nearly exhausted his credit amongst most enlightened Brazilians, because of his excesses; in the popular classes, he had not made much of an imprint anyway.” As it became evident that Fidel not only opposed foreign and especially U.S. economic domination (an

133 U.S. Embassy, Habana (Braddock), Airgram G-268, 20 November 1960, CDF 737.00/11-2060, RG 59, NA.
aim Brazilians comprehended) but “all capital, and capitalist ways, national as well,” and even more when he more clearly opened the door to rising communist influence, all this atop the curtailing of civil liberties, many Brazilians had grown wary of Fidel and his revolution. ¹³⁵

With the end of their term in Havana approaching—and a new president about to take office at the start of the new year in Brazil, as Quadros had won the October election to succeed Kubitschek—both Vasco and Virginia da Cunha still felt emotionally wrapped up in the ongoing Cuban drama, and clearly looked to continue to work towards aiding the struggle to undermine Castro’s communist-aligned and pro-Soviet rule in favor of a course that was still nationalistic and revolutionary but more democratic and pro-Western. Near the end of November 1960, a British colleague recorded the couple’s transformed outlook:

In the past Senor Leitao da Cunha, and more especially his wife, have been rather sympathetic towards Castro. Now, however, they have considerably revised their views. The ambassadress said that she would shortly be going back to Brazil and intended to tell members of the government and her friends about the ‘monstrous evil’ of the Castro regime. Senor da Cunha remarked at the same time that Brazil was aware of the arms build-up in Cuba and was concerned lest some of these were intended for use outside Cuba. He apparently even added that the means of dealing with the situation in Cuba might offer itself if and when the discontent grew to the point of actual fighting, and he hoped then that the O.A.S. or even the United Nations might intervene.¹³⁶

¹³⁵ See Canadian Ambassador, Rio de Janeiro (Jean Chapdelaine), Numbered Letter no. 724, “Brazil and the Cuban Revolution,” 23 November 1960, file 2348-40 pt. 7, vol. 5047, RG 25, LAC. Fidel Castro’s “value now,” Chapdelaine wrote, “is now almost exclusively that of a bogey: to show to Uncle Sam what happens when he refuses to have his pockets fleeced of liberal donations to aid development, and what happens when he attempts to stand up for his nationals there.”

Formerly “committed Fidelistas” at the time Castro took power, disillusionment had come “rather late” to Vasco and “much later” to Virginia, British ambassador H.S. Marchant would write a colleague in February 1961, after the da Cunhas had returned to Brazil. “The whole family were in close personal contact with Castro and many of his henchmen in the early days; their disappointment at the way things have gone is all the greater. Mrs. Da Cunha has really not yet got over it.”

Besides disappointed, the couple was also drained. “For four years the da Cunha’s house has been filled with asylees, occasionally as many as thirty,” Marchant wrote. “As a result of these contacts, he has been better briefed on counter-revolutionary plots and intrigue than the rest of us. He and his family have also been physically and emotionally exhausted by running this kind of guest house. The result has been that in spite of these good sources, he has not in fact, been any more accurate than the rest of us.”

137 H.S. Marchant to Geoffrey Wallinger, 15 February 1961, FO 371/156139, UKNA. One factor that may have contributed to Mrs. da Cunha’s displeasure in late 1960 was learning that the Castro government had now turned against a young Cuban communist she had befriended, Marcos Armando Rodriguez, who had found asylum in the Brazilian embassy in 1957, received safe passage to leave the country, and then returned after the revolution took power. By Rodriguez’s account, they had become close friends, and stayed in contact after he returned to Havana. As recounted above, Mrs. da Cunha apparently suggested to Fidel Castro at one point that Rodriguez, who had been awarded a scholarship to study in Prague by the Czechoslovak embassy in Mexico City, be sent there also on a diplomatic mission, as cultural attaché. However, by December 1, 1960, Vasco da Cunha had learned (from sources unknown) that “the Directory of Students here, in combination with the Communist Party, prepare a trap that will cost him his life” and sent a warning and an offer of financial help via the Brazilian embassy in Prague. Brazilian Embassy, Havana, tel. 360, 1 December 1960, AMRE. Soon after receiving this warning—on his way out of the Brazilian embassy, by one account—Czech authorities arrested him and extradited him to Cuba. After three years in prison, he was tried, convicted, and executed for the crime (to which he confessed) of tipping off Batista’s police in April 1957 to the whereabouts of four hiding student revolutionaries, who were then killed in a police attach. For more information and citations, see footnote 30.
in his crystal-gazing.” Possibly, his “rather special relations with Fidel Castro and Company” had “sometimes coloured his assessment of the Cuban scene.” Now, however, “as nearly all of us,” da Cunha shared the view that Castro’s regime was “fully committed to the Soviet bloc and he would welcome a change of regime.“ He, indeed, seemed to want Washington to take action, though he remained squeamish about direct or overt Brazilian support for or involvement in “aggression or preparations for aggression.”\footnote{H.S. Marchant to Geoffrey Wallinger, 15 February 1961, FO 371/156139, PRO.}

That last comment, of course, raised the question of da Cunha’s willingness to cooperate, sub rosa, with the CIA’s efforts to undermine Castro, and I will conclude this early exploration of this Brazilian diplomat’s story with a few comments on that. It is clear, as mentioned, that da Cunha had developed sympathy for and contacts with some Cubans who had supported the revolution, become disaffected with Castro due to his increasing communist and pro-Soviet affiliations, and had begun plotting against him—notably including, but not limited to, Manolo Ray’s MRP. Beginning in late 1960, but through the run-up to the April 1961 Bay of Pigs affair and beyond, he would continue contacts with prominent Cuban exiles who were also working, or at least dealing, with the CIA—including the mysterious agent “Frank Bender” (actually Gerry Droller), who had worked on the overthrow of Arbenz in Guatemala in 1954 and now was actively coordinating anti-Castro Cuban exile activities. A key figure in Agency efforts to recruit and organize anti-Castro forces, “Bender” was also doling out expense and salary money to some of the exiles, “for military training and maintaining their families,” allegedly from private sources, but da Cunha suspected it really came from the CIA, he told Cabot
back in Rio in January 1961 (the US ambassador privately agreed). Da Cunha had at least one direct contact with Bender I was able to document—a September 1961 CIA record declassified as part of the JFK Assassinations record project—but the full dimensions of his knowledge and activities related to CIA plotting against Castro, both during and after his ambassadorship in Havana, remain unclear.

One important case, however, has clarified. Juanita Castro, after spending several months in the Brazilian embassy in late 1958, during which she became close friends with Virginia da Cunha, left it after the revolution replaced Batista in January 1959. Like much of the Castro family, she had supported the revolution, and helped acquire arms for it. Not long after Castro took power, however, she began to suspect her brother of stronger communistic views and ties than she had thought, a tendency to which she strongly objected. She kept up her close friendship with “Nininha,” and it seems likely that their disillusionment with Castro’s rule evolved along parallel courses and was perhaps mutually reinforcing. (Juanita considered her friend a woman who was “valiant and just, who knew profoundly the situation in Cuba.”) In any case, Juanita made her way back to the Brazilian Embassy (it is not certain when, but probably in late 1960 or early 1961) to again seek political asylum, this time from her brother. However, despite intensely opposing the communist direction the revolution had taken, she remained uneasily in Cuba until mid-1964—when she defected to Mexico, openly denounced her brother’s rule, and became a full-fledged anti-Castro activist; arriving at

139 Cabot diary, 17 Jan 1961 entry.
141 In May 1961, a U.S. official in Rio learned from an Itamaraty source that “a sister of Fidel Castro sometime ago took asylum in Brazilian Embassy Habana and he believes she still there.” U.S. Embassy, Rio de Janeiro (Bond), tel. 1667, 23 May 1961, CDF 737.00/5-2361, box 1615, RG 59, NA.
the da Cunha’s home, shortly after the military took power, she recorded an anti-Castro statement to use in the Chilean election campaign then in progress, against Marxist candidate Salvador Allende (a more centrist candidate, Eduardo Frei, was elected instead). As Vasco da Cunha recalled in 1983: “At a given moment Juanita began to suspect that Fidel was a communist—she was anticommunist. And Fidel began to take certain attitudes with her that led to her to believe that when their mother died she could even be arrested. Friends advised her to leave Cuba. Today she lives in the United States, in Miami….”

It has long been suspected—and was even publicly reported at the time she first openly broke with Fidel, in 1964—that Juanita had collaborated with the CIA while still in Cuba. It was also no secret, for those who closely followed her life, that she had several times visited Brazil, where she saw her old friends the da Cunhas. (She also denounced Castro in Latin America, and da Cunha thought particularly important her public attacks on Castro’s communist ties during the 1964 Chilean election campaign, which ended with moderate Eduardo Frei defeating a candidate often identified with Castro, Salvador Allende.)

But only in a memoir published in 2009 did Juanita Castro admit both that she had worked for the CIA while still in Cuba until 1964—not on assassinations, but to provide intelligence and otherwise assist anti-Castro activities—and that she had been introduced to the Agency by none other than Virginia da Cunha. According to the book, it was

142 Da Cunha, Diplomacia em Alto-Mar, pp. 203-204.
144 Juanita Castro Ruz and Collins, Fidel y Raul, Mis Hermanos. I have also used widespread international press coverage of this story, from October-November 2009, accessed on-line.
the Brazilian ambassador’s wife who first introduced her to CIA contacts, but the
relationship with the U.S. intelligence agency began in June 1961, during a visit to
Mexico City, ostensibly to visit her sister Emma, where she met an agent named Tony
Sforza and adopted the code-name “Donna.” The implication is that Virginia was
involved in the CIA approach, but the da Cunhas left Cuba at the beginning of 1961,
returning only for short visits in mid-February and early April, so it’s not entirely clear
how this worked. I hope a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request on the case will
provide further information on what role the Brazilian ambassadorial couple played in
this intelligence affair.

****

After returning to Brazil in December 1960, da Cunha soon learned that he would
receive a new post in the incoming Quadros administration, as director-general of the
Brazilian foreign ministry.145 By then word of his conversion to robust anti-Castro views
was beginning to spread. In late November—before a memo of Braddock’s revelatory
collection with da Cunha reached him—Cabot had heard conflicting rumors regarding
Brazil’s ambassador in Havana. From Brazilian foreign minister Lafer the U.S.
ambassador heard that “Vasco was now completely disillusioned with the Fidelistas—
though of course he could say nothing.” Yet, the next day, a senior Itamaraty aide, Pio

---
145 Even before becoming president on 31 January 1961, Quadros had signaled his interest in obtaining
advice from da Cunha, whom of course he had come to know during his visit to Cuba the previous spring.
After Eisenhower severed U.S. relations with Cuba in early January 1961, Quadros sent a message from
Lisbon summoning that Brazil’s ambassador to Rio for consultations at the end of the month. See Brazilian
Embassy, Lisbon (de Lima), tel. 5, 4 Jan 1961, ANEXO Secreto—920(22)(00)—RELACIÔNES
POLÍTICAS E DIPLOMÁTICAS EE. UU UNIVERSO, AMRE.
Correa, “didn’t think Vasco was as disenchanted as Lafer indicated.”

Near the end of December 1960, in Washington, DC, his name cropped up in a conversation between two US ambassadors—to Rio and to Havana (temporarily shifted to Miami). Bonsal, wrote Cabot in his diary, “spoke in warm terms of Vasco and of his conversion from admiring Castro. He evidently thinks the Cuban people will eventually take care of Castro.”

In early January 1961, back in Brazil, just after the formal rupture in US-Cuban relations, Cabot saw his “old friend” Vasco, who recommended that he urge President-elect Kennedy to receive Manuel Ray, the anti-Castro revolutionary leader. “Leitao da Cunha, who has evidently changed from sympathizer with Cuba[’s] revolution to strong opponent, considers Ray [the] most likely leader to succeed in over-throwing Castro regime.”

As Cabot recorded, a “completely changed” da Cunha sympathized with Washington’s reasons for rupturing relations with Havana, and reported that the Cuba was “swarming with commie technicians,” who were “needed because everything is in chaos.” Castro had persisted in his provocative course “contrary to everyone’s advice,” even counsels of moderation from Moscow, who “didn’t want an enfant terrible to screw up their relations with the US,” da Cunha told the U.S. ambassador. Just as Kennedy took office, da Cunha was advising Cabot that Washington should exploit the formal break in US-Cuban diplomatic relations to “support an alternate government.”

---

146 Cabot diary, 21, 22, 30 Nov 1960 entries.
147 Cabot diary, 30 Dec 1960.
148 U.S. Embassy, Rio de Janeiro (Cabot), tel. 873, 5 January 1961, CDF 601.3237/1-561, box 1107, RG 59. However, Cabot recorded in his diary the same day that da Cunha had judged a second anti-Castro group, an underground labor movement based on the island, to be “much more significant than the exile groups.”
149 Cabot diary, 5 Jan 1961.
150 Cabot diary, 6 Jan 1961.
retained faith that Fidel would be overthrown from within Cuba, where there was “utter chaos in the island’s economy; every time the state took over something it went bust.”

Yet—despite such clear signs of favoring Castro’s overthrow, even by force, even involving U.S. intervention—da Cunha remained, to all outward appearances, a “friend of the Cuban Revolution.” Publicly, he was quoted as saying that Brazil and Cuba enjoyed “excellent relations,” with the only problem between them currently the Havana government’s refusal to allow safe passage to leave the country for the many asylees presently living at Brazil’s embassy. And he continued to have cordial personal contacts with the top of Fidel Castro’s revolutionary government.

As his term drew to a close, in mid-January 1961, he received audiences, on successive days, with senior Cuban officials: President Osvaldo Dorticos, Foreign Minister Raul Roa (at his request), and Roa’s deputy, Subsecretary of Foreign Affairs Carlos Olivares. Obviously eager to retain decent relations with Brazil, especially in view of Quadros’ impending ascent to the presidency, all three were not only personally cordial but did their best to sound as moderate as possible, in striking contrast to, for example, Roa’s crudely bellicose comments at San Jose five months earlier. All disclaimed any desire to break relations with Washington, which they blamed for a campaign of persuading Latin American governments to sever ties with Havana; expressed readiness for open-ended talks with the United States; and disavowed or minimized Cuban officials’ comments promoting revolution in South America (an expressed longing for “a Sierra Maestra in the Andes Cordillera” meant support for the struggle against US imperialism, not local governments, Olivares insisted); implying an

---

151 Cabot diary, 17 Jan 1961.
optimistic outlook, Dorticos and Roa even praised several cabinet appointments by JFK, who would be sworn in a week or so later, and the foreign minister “reiterated that the Cuban Government aimed to be equidistant from the two poles of attraction, capitalist and socialist, and renewed his guarantees to not seek to subvert the present regimes in Latin America.” Such comments seemed to mark a return to Fidel’s conciliatory posture at the late-night May 10 asado with hemispheric ambassadors, but the Brazilian treated them with caution. Having already concluded that in both foreign and internal policy Havana was steering “fatally” into the socialist bloc, da Cunha heard all this warily. He concluded that, “spontaneously or by pressure from the Soviet Union,” the Cuban Government wanted for purely tactical reason to retain decent relations with Brazil and other Latin states, at least for the time being and especially in view of the increasingly fraught confrontation with the United States, and the Kremlin’s concurrent desire to test the waters for better ties with the new U.S. administration. After consulting one more time with his fellow Latin American ambassadors, he reported that they all shared his view that the best position to take for the time being would be “vigilant anticipation” and avoiding a formal break in relations, which would deprive hope and asylum for those still trying to resist Castro at home. He also found that the European colleague he respected as most knowledgeable, the Dutch ambassador (whom he had known when they were both posted in Peru three decades earlier), also shared his belief that the most advisable course was to let Castro to stew in his own juices until he began to seek his and Cuba’s way out of isolation, rather than mounting out of impatience a US or US-backed military adventure which might yield a “Pyrrhic victory.”

152 Unless otherwise stated, all comments regarding da Cunha’s 12-14 January 1961 meetings with
Returning then to Rio, da Cunha in late January offered his own valedictory advice to his foreign minister, urging Brazil to “keep open eyes” for the Cuban government’s “maneuvers,” which might well include public statements echoing the assertion made in September 1959 to the United Nations by Roa that Cuba’s revolution was “essentially humanist and is inspired in the sources of thought of Martí, condemning with equal vehemence the capitalism which exploits man through the economy and the communism that deprives liberty and does not recognize individual rights.” While that might have been true until the middle of 1960, da Cunha concluded, “currently one can no longer say the same.”

In mid-February, after a few weeks to consult with the incoming Quadros team and prepare to assume his new post as foreign ministry director-general, da Cunha returned to Havana for a farewell bash at which his still good personal ties with the top of Castro’s revolutionary government were evident. (An aide hosted the festivities, after Roa had cancelled a planned goodbye banquet at the foreign ministry due to the three-day mourning period ordered to mark Congolese nationalist Patrice Lumumba’s death.)

“The huge crowd, with representatives from the old and the new regime and all the diplomatic missions, which gathered last night at his farewell party is a fair measure of his popularity,” one diplomat present wrote. Later that night, da Cunha met separately

---

154 So da Cunha explained to Bonsal, whom he met a day later in Miami. See Bonsal-da Cunha memorandum of conversation, “Subject: Views of Brazilian Ambassador Leitao da Cunha regarding the Cuban Situation” 17 February 1961, CDF 737.00/2-1761, box 1609, RG 59, NA.
155 H.S. Marchant to Geoffrey Wallinger, 15 February 1961, FO 371/156139, UKNA.
with Che Guevara and then, for three hours with Fidel—his first one-on-one talk with the Cuban leader since July 1959 and, the CIA reported, “the first time in over a year [Castro] is known to have talked alone with a Western diplomat.” Although conducted in an “atmosphere of great cordiality,” their long conversation had some sharp moments. Still, after Da Cunha offered a blunt “critique of communism” and of Havana’s “fundamental error” in “divorcing itself from the inter-American system,” Castro “was very flattering in the comments he made when he left the room.”

In fact, Vasco Leitão da Cunha would meet several times in the first months of 1961 with both Fidel Castro and senior U.S. officials in the run-up to the Bay of Pigs, seeking an eleventh-hour alternative to the violent conflict he saw looming ahead—however, that is a story for the next section of my study, which deals with US-Cuban-Brazilian relations during the Kennedy/Quadros interregnum of January-August 1961.

Three years later, in April 1964, when the military toppled Quadros’ center-leftist successor, João Goulart, Cuba was dismayed by the coup, but Roa initially derived comfort from the junta’s appointment of da Cunha as foreign minister. Castro’s foreign minister considered it a “significant” sign that Brazil would not break relations, he told a Western diplomat shortly after the coup, since da Cunha “had been Ambassador here at the time of the revolution and had personally befriended the Castros and other

---


revolutionaries though he had since become more hostile to the Revolution.”¹⁵⁸ From Havana, a Soviet-bloc ambassador observed a few weeks later that da Cunha still had “many Cuban friends and acquaintances” who recalled that his providing haven to “progressive people under Batista. Most call him a traitor now,” Hungary’s envoy added, “but some hope that he can prevent a break in relations with Cuba.”¹⁵⁹

Such hopes were in vain. In mid-May, da Cunha presided over the formal rupture of Brazilian-Cuban diplomatic relations. Two months after that, in close consultation with U.S. officials, as chair, he guided a OAS foreign ministers meeting in Washington to a strong condemnation and further sanctions against Cuba. In the four years after the military coup, first as foreign minister and then as Brazil’s ambassador to the United States, he would earn kudos from Johnson Administration officials as a reliable Cold War ally against communism in general, and Fidel Castro’s Cuba in particular.

Shortly before his death in 1984, at age 81, in private oral history interviews, he would retrospectively express respect for Che Guevara (“idealistic, capable of dying for

¹⁵⁸ British Embassy, Havana (Watson), tel. 21, 18 April 1964, FO 371/174021, UKNA. In a similar vein, the Dutch chargé d’affaires in Havana commented that da Cunha’s appointment as foreign minister “has perhaps given Havana some hope” that the new Brazilian regime would not cut ties, since da Cunha was “regarded as moderate.” See letter from Dutch Embassy, Havana (K.W. Reinink), to Minister of Foreign Affairs, The Hague, no. 641/159, 16 April 1964, inventory 2.05.118 (17019) Brazil; diplomatic relations 1955-1964. Cuba, 1960-1964, Dutch Foreign Ministry Archives, The Hague, Netherlands; obtained and translated by Bastiaan Bouwman. In late April, a Soviet-bloc diplomat in Rio speculated that the likelihood the Brazilian military government would sever relations with Cuba was lessening and implied that this was in part due to the appointment of da Cunha, who was “not a man of extremes.” Hungarian Embassy, Rio de Janeiro (Droppa), “Latin American events triggered by the Brazilian military coup and the new foreign policy of Brazil,” 28 April 1964, Hungarian National Archives (MOL), Budapest; obtained by Balazs Szalontai, translated by Sabine Topolansky.

¹⁵⁹ Report from Hungarian Embassy, Havana (Beck), “Subject: The Cuban reaction regarding the Brazilian military coup,” 14 May 1964, MOL; obtained by Balazs Szalontai, translated by Sabine Topolansky.
an ideal…magnificent, a man of his word”) and Raul Castro (likewise “a man of his word”). As for the Cuban revolution’s leader, he confessed “a weakness for Fidel,” yet added: “I liked him, but he proceeded so badly, I lost the respect.”\textsuperscript{160} 

\textsuperscript{160} Da Cunha, \textit{Diplomacia em Alto-Mar}, pp. 208-209.