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## REVIEW ESSAYS

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### CRANKY NEIGHBORS: 150 YEARS OF U.S.-CUBAN RELATIONS

*William M. LeoGrande*  
*American University*

**One Minute to Midnight: Kennedy, Khrushchev, and Castro on the Brink of Nuclear War.** By Michael Dobbs. New York: Knopf, 2008. Pp. xvii + 448. \$28.95 cloth.

**The Cuba Wars: Fidel Castro, the United States, and the Next Revolution.** By Daniel P. Erikson. New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2008. Pp. xiv + 368. \$28.00 cloth.

**Bacardi and the Long Fight for Cuba: The Biography of a Cause.** By Tom Gjelten. New York: Viking, 2008. Pp. xiii + 480. \$27.95 cloth.

**Cuba in the American Imagination.** By Louis A. Pérez Jr. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. Pp. xiv + 352. \$34.95 cloth.

**That Infernal Little Cuban Republic: The United States and the Cuban Revolution.** By Lars Schoultz. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009. Pp. xii + 768. \$35.00 cloth.

**U.S.-Cuban Cooperation Past Present and Future.** By Melanie M. Ziegler. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007. Pp. xii + 182. \$59.95 cloth.

January 2, 2009, marked the fiftieth anniversary of the triumph of the Cuban Revolution—half a century in which the third world was decolonized; the cold war came to an end; and globalization put health, environment, crime, and terrorism on the transnational agenda. In Latin America, the

hegemony of the United States dissipated, fundamentally transforming ties with the hemisphere. Yet relations between Washington and Havana remained frozen in time, hardly changed from the earliest months of Fidel Castro's rule. No other aspect of U.S. diplomacy around the globe was so unaffected by the momentous changes that swept through and transformed the international system. Like Dorian Gray, U.S. policy has stayed unnaturally ageless while all about it changes. What is it about this "infernal island," as Teddy Roosevelt called it, that gives rise to such singular obsession on the part of the United States? The revolution's fiftieth anniversary has brought forth a spate of new books on U.S.-Cuban relations that, either explicitly or implicitly, offer answers to that question.

Daniel Erikson's *The Cuba Wars* chronicles recent U.S.-Cuban relations, principally of the George W. Bush era. After concisely providing the requisite background, Erikson takes the reader on a guided tour of the topic, stopping at all the important sites. At the Bush White House, the president's instinct for unilateralism and his quasi-religious zeal to spread democracy produced the most unsparingly hostile policy toward Cuba of any of his nine predecessors. As with much of Bush's foreign policy, the strategy toward Havana was based more on faith than on reality. Its underlying premise was that the Cuban regime would crumble when Fidel Castro died, and somehow the tiny dissident movement favored by Washington would be catapulted to power (with a little help from the United States, of course). The orderly succession from Fidel to Raúl Castro in 2006 proved this premise utterly wrong, leaving the Bush administration flummoxed. As in Iraq, nobody had bothered to devise a plan B.

At the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue, Congress held more cards on Cuba than on most foreign policy issues. The Helms-Burton Act of 1996 wrote the U.S. economic embargo into law, thus requiring congressional repeal before the United States and Cuba could resume normal commerce. Fearful that President Bill Clinton might lift the embargo by executive order—the same mechanism that President John F. Kennedy used to impose it—congressional Republicans crafted Helms-Burton to tie the president's hands, usurping control over Cuba policy. That proved to be a formula for paralysis. During George W. Bush's first term, farm-state Republicans and Democrats combined to pass legislation relaxing the ban on travel to Cuba in both the House and Senate, only to see Republican leaders, doing the White House's bidding, scuttle the bills. In Bush's second term, a resurgent campaign finance operation by conservative Cuban Americans broke the congressional majority for relaxing the embargo by funneling hundreds of thousands of dollars into the coffers of congressional candidates.

Next stop Miami—by some accounts, the real decision-making center for U.S. policy toward Cuba. A standard explanation for the stagnancy of policy since the end of the cold war is that the powerful Cuban American lobby, concentrated in an electorally strategic state, has been able to dic-

tate policy to every president since Ronald Reagan. This explanation has merit, even though it is not the whole story. During the presidencies of Reagan and the Bushes, Cuban American hard-liners were pushing on an open door: they had sympathetic presidents predisposed to hostility toward Cuba. Miami hard-liners helped to shape the specifics of U.S. policy but did not have to convince the president that hostility was warranted.

As Erikson notes, time may not have changed U.S. policy, but it has changed Miami. The Cuban American community, augmented annually by twenty thousand new legal immigrants and thousands more illegal ones, has become much more amenable to maintaining family ties to the island and even to opening U.S. ties. An April 2009 poll of Cuban Americans found that 64 percent supported lifting all restrictions on Cuban American travel and remittances; 67 percent supported removing travel restrictions for all Americans; and a plurality of 44 percent supported lifting the embargo.<sup>1</sup>

Even the Cuban American National Foundation, long the center of the community's political muscle, has come to realize that isolating Cuba has not brought progress toward democracy and never will. Barack Obama campaigned in Miami, promising to lift restrictions on Cuban American family contacts and to engage Cuba in diplomatic dialogue. He carried Florida, winning 35 percent of the Cuban American vote, more than any Democrat before him. The remaining Cuban American rejectionists who oppose any contact with the island—most notably the three Republican members of the House of Representatives—now swim against the tide even in their own community.

Across the Florida Strait, Fidel and Raúl Castro have remained implacably determined to defeat Washington's and Miami's ambition to roll back the revolution. Over the years, Fidel has taken obvious pleasure in besting one U.S. president after another, and he has built such valuable political capital by embodying Cuba's nationalist defiance of the Goliath to the north that some have wondered whether he truly wanted to normalize relations. During the Bush years, it was impossible to know, because George W. Bush refused to talk to Havana even about issues of mutual interest. President Obama, in his first few months in office, seemed willing to test Havana's intentions.

In truth, Cuba's leaders have always been willing to talk with Washington and to seek some *modus vivendi*. What they have not been willing to do is sacrifice what they regard as basic principles in exchange for better relations. When Presidents Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson demanded that Cuba ends its alliance with the Soviet Union as a condition of normalization, Castro refused. When Presidents Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan

1. Bendixen and Associates, *National Survey of Cuban Americans, April 20, 2009* (Coral Gables, FL: Bendixen and Associates, 2009).

demanded that Cuba abandon its support for allies in Africa and Central America, Castro refused. And when Presidents George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush demanded that Cuba accept multiparty democracy and a free-market economy, both Fidel and Raúl Castro refused.

Nevertheless, Washington and Havana have been able to reach agreement on issues of mutual interest. In *U.S.-Cuban Cooperation Past, Present and Future*, Melanie Ziegler focuses on four areas in which the United States and Cuba have managed to carve out a degree of cooperation, despite the antagonism of their overall bilateral relationship: migration, counternarcotics, the "fence line" talks at Guantánamo, and coast guard cooperation to avoid accidental military clashes. The common thread in each of these areas of limited cooperation is how mutual interest drew the two governments together even as cooperation has remained constrained by the wider context of bilateral hostility and distrust.

Migration has been the subject of bilateral discussions since the early 1960s. Informal accords ended the Camarioca and Mariel boat lifts in 1965 and 1980. Formal agreements in 1987, 1994, and 1995 regularized and expanded legal emigration from Cuba to the United States. The 1995 agreement also inaugurated a U.S. policy of returning migrants intercepted in international waters. This deterred Cubans from setting off across the Florida straits on homemade rafts but produced a growing business of people smuggling, operating through Mexico. If illegal Cuban migrants manage to arrive on U.S. soil, they are virtually ensured permanent resident status under the Cuban Adjustment Act of 1966. This anomaly in U.S. law has long been a sore point for Cuban officials, who regard it as a stimulus for illegal departure and hijacking, as Cuban hijackers are rarely prosecuted in the United States. The migration agreements signed in 1994 and 1995 provided for semiannual consultation between U.S. and Cuban diplomats to manage implementation of the accords. This process fell apart when George W. Bush suspended the consultations in 2003.

The poor state of U.S.-Cuban relations has left a hole in U.S. border security that both narcotics traffickers and people smugglers can exploit. Caribbean routes have been popular with Colombian traffickers for decades. In the late 1980s, some Cuban security officials were corrupted into facilitating drug shipments on fast boats into the United States. Down-sized after the cold war, the Cuban navy's ability to patrol its coastal waters has declined, enabling smugglers to hide in Cuban waters to escape U.S. law enforcement.

Since the 1990s, the United States and Cuba have cooperated on a case-by-case basis to thwart narcotics traffickers, but U.S. conservatives have blocked more systematic cooperation. Begun under President Clinton, the cooperative program immediately became a lightning rod for Republicans, who charged that Cuba was itself guilty of narcotics trafficking and therefore could not be trusted as a partner. Fearful of the political tempest,

Clinton limited cooperation to ad hoc communications, refusing Cuba's offers to forge a more comprehensive strategy for attacking both drug and people traffickers in the Caribbean. George W. Bush also spurned Cuban offers for closer cooperation, even though Cuba had developed successful counternarcotics programs in cooperation with several dozen countries, including U.S. allies such as Mexico, the Bahamas, Colombia, Great Britain, and other European Union members.

The "fence line" talks between U.S. and Cuban military authorities at Guantánamo are what diplomats call technical-level talks, involving operational details of how the two militaries interact at the base. They have proved productive in reducing tensions, avoiding accidents, and securing Cuban approval for changing base needs. Raúl Castro has praised the constructive and respectful atmosphere of the talks, suggesting that they could be a model for broader bilateral discussions. Here, too, domestic U.S. politics has been the stumbling block. Within the U.S. military, especially at Southern Command, senior officers are eager to expand military-to-military contacts with their Cuban counterparts. During the George W. Bush administration, however, they were prohibited from doing so by the Department of State on the grounds that such contacts would offer the Cubans an intelligence advantage.

The Pentagon was not always at the forefront of seeking dialogue with Cuba. During the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, the U.S. military lobbied hard for an all-out air attack and invasion of the island, and the Joint Chiefs were severely disappointed when the crisis was peacefully resolved and their invasion plans had to be shelved.

The Cuban Missile Crisis must be the most thoroughly dissected international incident in history—and rightly so, because the world teetered on the brink of annihilation for thirteen days. In *One Minute to Midnight*, Michael Dobbs provides the most comprehensive account thus far of the crisis, bolstered by much new information and several revelations. The new material Dobbs uncovered adds fascinating detail to certain aspects of the crisis and corrects some long-standing historical errors, but it does not change the conventional historical understanding of what happened and why. Dobbs does not offer a new interpretation of the crisis—in fact, he offers hardly any interpretation at all. The book's value is that it provides the reader with, literally, a minute-by-minute narrative of the crisis as it unfolded, imbuing the story with a building sense of urgency and drama.

This is a story seen from many vantage points. The main plot unfolds in Washington, Moscow, and Havana, with John F. Kennedy, Nikita Khrushchev, and Fidel Castro as protagonists. The narrative also takes us to the front lines of the crisis: a Soviet missile base in Cuba; a Minuteman missile base in Montana; a Soviet submarine patrolling the Caribbean, shadowed by U.S. destroyers; a U-2 reconnaissance plane lost over the Soviet Arctic;

and a sabotage team of Cuban exiles stranded by the crisis on the Cuban coast. At some points in the narrative, such jumping from venue to venue is distracting, but, as Dobbs rightly notes, most of these subplots had the potential to erupt into global war, carrying events beyond control of the protagonists.

On the fateful climactic day of the crisis, Soviet missile troops shot down a U-2 over Cuba, killing the pilot and prompting the Pentagon to demand immediate retaliation against every anti-aircraft site on the island. In the Arctic, another U-2 pilot on a routine polar mission was disoriented by the aurora borealis and strayed three hundred miles into Soviet territory, prompting the Soviet government to wonder whether World War III had begun. In the Caribbean, U.S. destroyers dropped practice depth charges on Soviet submarines, trying to force them to surface, leading one submarine commander to seriously consider launching a nuclear-tipped torpedo against the U.S. flotilla. And on the ground in Cuba, Soviet troops armed with tactical nuclear weapons awaited a U.S. invasion. No wonder Robert McNamara concluded that the world had avoided nuclear holocaust merely by luck.

Dobbs attributes civilization's survival to the personalities of Kennedy and Khrushchev. Both were "sane and level-headed" (353), able to step back from the immediacy of the crisis as it unfolded, working hard to control events rather than simply being driven by them. Both were prepared to make significant political sacrifices to resolve the crisis. Khrushchev agreed to the indignity of removing Soviet missiles from Cuba; Kennedy was ready to trade U.S. missiles in Europe publicly, if necessary. Perhaps most important, both Kennedy and Khrushchev had experienced the fog of war. They knew that they could not fully control what was happening on the front lines of the crisis and that a misstep by a local commander could lead to Armageddon. They knew that the probability of accidental war increased the longer the crisis went on, so they sought to resolve it quickly. In the end, they managed to control events, but just barely.

To Fidel Castro, the missile crisis exemplified everything he hated about Great Powers, be they capitalist or socialist. Great Powers treated small countries like Cuba as pawns, not as equals. They made decisions about the lives of Cubans without ever consulting them, denying them any role in shaping their own destiny. Much of Cuba's history can be understood as the struggle of its people to make their own history, free of the tutelage of colonial and neocolonial masters.

In *Bacardi and the Long Fight for Cuba*, the veteran journalist Tom Gjelten takes us on a journey across 150 years of Cuban history through the microcosm of the Bacardi family. Although the story of no one family can truly encapsulate the history of a whole nation, that of the Bacardis comes close. Across four generations, they were patriots, fighting for Cuban independence in both 1868 and 1895, struggling against the dictatorship of



Gerardo Machado in the 1930s, resisting Fulgencio Batista's corruption in the 1950s, and supporting Fidel Castro's July 26 Movement. They built an empire on rum—"The one that made Cuba famous." Based in Santiago de Cuba, the Bacardis were the first family of the eastern end of the island and the very model of enlightened bourgeois, lauded for their civic responsibility and fair labor practices. Indeed, when the communist-led union at Bacardi issued a diatribe against capitalist exploiters, it cited Bacardi as an exception to the rule.

When Fidel Castro's revolution triumphed, the Bacardis, like most Cubans, were ecstatic. Unsolicited, they paid their 1959 taxes early to help the revolutionary government recover from Batista's looting of the treasury. When the young Raúl Castro married fellow guerrilla Vilma Espín, a Bacardi scion, the whole extended family turned out for the wedding. Even as the revolution swerved to the left, nationalizing U.S. businesses, the Bacardis continued to hope that Fidel Castro's youthful exuberance would subside into sensible social democracy. When Castro decreed the nationalization of Bacardi's Cuban enterprises (Bacardi rum and Hatuey beer), it was not because the Bacardis had done anything wrong, one of Fidel's comrades admitted. It was simply a matter of principle: there was no place for private enterprise in the new Cuba.

By then, Bacardi was already a transnational (though still family-owned) firm, so the family in exile was able to quickly rebuild the business from its enterprises in Mexico, Puerto Rico, and the United States. As it penetrated international markets, Bacardi rum lost its distinctively Cuban identity, but the family never did. Its tradition of political engagement led naturally to its support of various exile organizations from the 1960s onward. The story of the Bacardi family in exile is also the story, in microcosm, of the Cuban community abroad.

The Bacardis' most public battle with Fidel Castro was sparked by the company's attempt to grab the trademark for what had once been a rival brand: Havana Club. Produced since the 1960s by the Cuban government, Havana Club gained an international reputation when Cuba opened up to international tourism in the 1990s. Bacardi, hoping to nip the competition in the bud (and bitter that any rum other than Bacardi could be regarded as Cuba's rum), bought rights to the trademark from its previous owner, although he had long since let it expire, whereupon the Cuban government had it registered abroad. The ensuing legal battle over whether the Cuban government or Bacardi owned the trademark consumed millions in legal fees and ended only when the U.S. Congress passed a law that effectively handed the trademark to Bacardi.

In the midst of this battle, I happened to attend a formal reception in Havana hosted by Fidel Castro, who railed against Bacardi's lawsuit. At his signal, white-coated waiters rolled out carts filled with bottles of white rum bearing the familiar Bacardi label but with the proviso "Made in

Cuba." If Bacardi was going to produce Havana Club, Fidel said with a sly grin as waiters served the assembled guests, perhaps Cuba would resume producing Bacardi. The ersatz Bacardi was not very good, and I remember thinking that Fidel knew just what would most irritate his antagonists. Quality was always Bacardi's hallmark.

As Gjelten's narrative unfolds, the role of the United States is peripheral, though never insignificant. An ardent fighter for Cuban independence, Emilio Bacardi (son of the firm's founder) deeply resented how the United States usurped Cuba's independence movement in 1898 and treated Cubans as if they were incapable of self-government. Nevertheless, as mayor of Santiago, he developed a close personal friendship with U.S. military governor Leonard Wood. Emilio remained convinced that Washington's imposition prevented Cuba from developing a functioning political system in the years after nominal independence. The United States reappears in the narrative in the 1930s, first supporting Machado's dictatorship, then Batista's. In exile, the Bacardis, like so many others, hoped that Washington would solve the problem of Fidel for them.

The history of Bacardi is extraordinary, and for that reason it offers a glimpse of the Cuba that might have been if most businesses had been as socially responsible as Bacardi, and if most politicians had been as civic minded and honest. But, of course, they were not—which is why Cuba had a revolution. In that sense, the Bacardis were casualties as much of the rapaciousness and corruption of their fellow elites as they were of Fidel Castro. The Bacardis in exile lost their distinctiveness in this regard, becoming—like so many others who lost their livelihoods in the revolution—trapped in the past and embittered by their memories of a Cuba that no longer existed.

Image and memory are center stage in Louis Pérez's latest book on Cuban history, *Cuba in the American Imagination*. In Washington think tanks, policy analysts are apt to offer detailed cost-benefit analyses of policy options, carefully and logically weighing the probabilities and utilities of various outcomes against one another. In the public arena, this is not how policy debates unfold. Victory in the public arena goes to those who most effectively mobilize popular emotions and tie their policies to deeply held values. The mechanism for making that connection, Pérez argues, is metaphor. Pérez adopts an approach drawn from the attempt of literary theory to expand its domain to encompass the social sciences. Most of the time, this approach is a poor fit to the subject matter, but in the hands of a superb historian like Pérez, its value shines through.

By quoting both U.S. political leaders and the popular press, reproducing many period cartoons, Pérez demonstrates that the Cuba that took shape in the American imagination beginning in the early nineteenth century was constructed around metaphors of proximity, neighborhood, and racialism. Cuba, by virtue of being so close to the United States, was



a “natural” part of it, inevitably destined to join the union, falling like a “ripe fruit” into its basket; indeed, the union would be incomplete without Cuba. Cubans, however, were regarded as an inferior race of mixed Spanish and African blood, incapable of managing their own affairs. Thus, it was the duty of the United States to step in and lend them a helping hand, just as any good neighbor would.

As Cuba’s second war of independence got under way in 1895, the public debate in the United States took on new urgency, and these early metaphors were overlaid with new ones of Cuba as defenseless victim (of Spanish iniquity) and of Cuba as uncivilized and racially dangerous, at risk of becoming an unstable black republic if given independence. This constellation of images became the “knowledge” that most North Americans had of Cuba, and it neatly justified both U.S. intervention and the subordination of Cuba as a quasi-colonial dependency. In the American imagination, the United States occupied Cuba not out of self-interest but out of selflessness: to defend a weak and incapable neighbor from vicious attack, and then to help that neighbor put his house in proper order, thereby keeping the neighborhood stable and at peace: “imperialism enacted as an etiquette,” Pérez calls it (137).

This chimera had special importance historically, allowing the United States to rationalize self-interested behavior as noble and beneficent, not only in Cuba but also beyond. The Spanish-American War marked the emergence of the United States as a global power, willing and able to wield its economic and military might on a global scale. The metaphors of Cuba that reconciled this new imperial reach with the values and self-image of Americans as generous and democratic were soon deployed around the world as ideological companions of U.S. gunboats.

These metaphors echo through the other books here under review. Tom Gjelten recounts how U.S. forces in 1898 denigrated Cuba’s army of independence as an uncivilized rabble, refusing to let it enter Santiago for fear that it would loot and pillage the city. General Calixto García’s response to the U.S. commander captures the full measure of how divorced from reality the U.S. perception was. “We are not savages, ignoring the rules of civilized warfare,” García wrote; “We are a poor ragged army as poor and ragged as was the army of your forefathers in their noble war of independence, but like the heroes of Saratoga and Yorktown, we respect our cause too deeply to disgrace it with barbarism and cowardice” (77).

Such iconic images of Cuba persisted in the American imagination after 1959 but soon became incongruous with a fiercely independent revolutionary order. This new Cuba was so dissonant with the Cuba that U.S. policy makers thought they knew that they had a hard time figuring out how to understand and deal with it. At first, as Lars Schoultz documents in *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic*, Washington thought of Castro and his revolutionaries as petulant, immature children who did not understand

the beneficent role that the United States had played in Cuban history—a metaphor no doubt reinforced by the fact that Cuba's new leaders were young and immature. Later, when it became clear that Castro was not going to outgrow his antagonism toward Washington, the inability of U.S. policy makers to understand how Cubans saw U.S.-Cuban history led them to conclude that Castro must be crazy.

Pérez argues that the cognitive dissonance Fidel Castro produced in the American psyche stripped Americans of the illusion that their expeditions abroad were really as selfless and generous as they liked to believe. By insisting on the primacy of Cuba's own image of itself, Castro pulled back the curtain on U.S. motives to reveal the dark, selfish, and cruel side of empire. He forced the United States to confront the Mr. Hyde behind its self-imagined Dr. Jekyll. For that, Castro could never be forgiven.

For all the dramatic moments in U.S.-Cuban relations over the past half century, for all the many thousands of pages written about Fidel Castro's standoff with ten U.S. presidents, no one has written a comprehensive history of this tumultuous relationship—until Schoultz in *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic*. Prodigious research across many archives has produced a tour de force that will stand as the field's preeminent diplomatic history until the papers of the most recent U.S. presidents (and perhaps also of Cuba's leaders) become available sometime in the future. The bulk of this tome recounts in wonderful detail the battles between Washington and Havana from one presidential administration to the next.

Schoultz frames this epochal struggle in terms that echo those of his colleague Louis Pérez. To be sure, the United States had real interests at stake in Cuba, but Washington pursued those interests within an ideology of beneficent domination and a hegemonic presumption that, as the Great Power in the Western Hemisphere, the United States had the right to do as it pleased. Think Thucydides with a gloss of smug do-gooderism. Schoultz, like Pérez, is struck by the recurrent racial justifications for Washington's civilizing mission—a theme that Schoultz explored previously in his history of U.S. relations with all of Latin America.<sup>2</sup>

Whereas Pérez is inclined to see Washington's initial and persistent hostility to Fidel Castro's revolution as the result of the psychic trauma inflicted when Castro shattered U.S. illusions about the island, Schoultz takes a more conventional realist stance. The revolution of 1959 threatened U.S. economic interests and, as it moved to the left, also raised the specter of communist penetration in the Western Hemisphere. This produced "an easily constructed condominium of interests between economic elites and national security officials" intent on overthrowing Fidel (562). For the duration of the cold war, this was sufficient to explain U.S. hostility. When

2. Lars Schoultz, *Beneath the United States: A History of U.S. Policy toward Latin America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

the cold war ended and the threats evaporated, Washington politicians discovered that Cuban Americans in Florida had become a potent political force, able to block any change in policy. Unlike Erikson, Schoultz does not see much hope of change in Miami—not, at least, until the generation of exiles that fled the revolution in the early 1960s dies off. Even then, when all the material reasons that undergirded the policy of hostility have finally melted away, there will still remain their ideational remnant—the persistent notion that the United States has the right, if not the obligation, to “uplift” the Cuban people and give them democracy, just as we “gave” them their independence a century ago.