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PRESIDENT'S MEETING WITH SENATORS
JAMES ABOUREZK AND GEORGE McGOVERN
MARCH 19, 1977 - 2:35-3:00 p.m.

The President said that he had made a number of symbolic gestures like lifting the travel restrictions, and that he felt the time had come for Castro to reciprocate.

McGovern said that Castro, who had spoken with him for five hours, had said that he recognized the lifting of the travel restrictions as a gesture of interest by the new Administration, and he said he appreciated it. Castro also was aware of the progress in the fisheries negotiations, and appreciated the attitude of the U.S. negotiators. Castro said that while he considered Carter to be an idealistic and religious man, he felt the stern political realities in the United States would prevent or hamper the President's efforts to normalize relations.

McGovern said that the Cubans were obsessed with the embargo, and insisted that they would not negotiate other issues besides the fisheries agreement until at least part of the embargo was lifted.

The President expressed concern about the presence of 20,000 Cuban troops in Angola, and McGovern said that Castro had promised him the troops would be coming out and that he does not envision any other military activities in Africa. Castro insisted there were no Cuban troops in Zaire, nor any in Uganda, and that the Chinese were responsible for these rumors. (McGovern, who had visited Cuba in 1975, had noticed that the Cubans had become increasingly hostile to the Chinese.)

[REDACTED]

McGovern explained to Castro why a bill, which only partially lifted the embargo, made more political sense than a total lifting of the embargo. Castro had said that he presumed that Cuba would be able to sell sugar, rum, cigars (and tourism), otherwise the lifting of the embargo did not make much sense.

President Carter said that Cuban sugar imports would present a problem because of the current low price. McGovern said that the Cubans were selling their sugar to the Russians for 30 cents a pound, but that Castro understood such terms would not be possible with the United States.

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Abourezk said he had not spoken to Castro on this trip, but in 1975, Castro had said he wanted relations, but not if the U.S. wanted him to crawl to the negotiating tables. McGovern said that there was not a lot Castro could give us.

President Carter said that there were 20,000 Cuban prisoners, most of whom have been in prison for 15 years. Many moderate Cuban-Americans had helped him in his campaign and believe that Castro could permit these people out of jail. This is something the President thought could be done.

McGovern said that Castro appreciated that President Carter's statements have not been inflammatory. The President said: "I have tried to be careful." In contrast, President Ford's characterization of Castro as an "international outlaw," was in Castro's opinion, an invitation to terrorism.

McGovern explained his bill to lift the embargo, and asked whether the President could support it. President Carter carefully said: "I feel secure in my position. A Congressional initiative would not cause me concern." He said that he discussed the issue before. (McGovern later told the press that the President "would not block efforts to partially lift the embargo.")

The President [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Another issue that bothered him was the Cuban effort to inflame the Puerto Rican issue.

The President said that Castro's precondition that the U.S. must lift the embargo before negotiations begin makes things difficult. He said that he tried to put himself in Castro's position (as he had done on SALT for Brezhnev), and he could understand why Cuba could not respond to a lifting of the embargo with an immediate withdrawal of troops from Angola or by releasing Cuban political prisoners. There was an obvious need to save face on Castro's part, and we have been very careful not to embarrass the Cubans in negotiations. But he hoped that Castro would extend the discussions to other issues, and in particular, he hoped that there would be some progress on the issues of Puerto Rico and U.S. prisoners. He said that he would like to have better relations with Cuba,

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McGovern said that Raul Castro had given him a list of all the times and dates of SR-71 overflights, and he noted that the last flight had occurred on January 11, 1977. Raul Castro had asked McGovern to release the list and the photograph to the press. Raul Castro said that maybe President Carter had called off the flights. McGovern said that perhaps Todman should tell the Cubans that President Carter had deliberately decided to call off the flights. President Carter said that he thought that was a good idea.

McGovern concluded by saying that the Cubans liked the way the negotiations have been handled thus far, particularly in the limited recourse to publicity.

(To the press afterwards, McGovern said that the President asked them during the meeting what Cuban President Fidel Castro had said about Cuban forces throughout Africa. They quoted Castro as saying he will maintain some military attaches in Africa.)

The Senators said they found no rigidity on the President's part in discussing normalization of ties with Havana, and McGovern said President Carter told them he was "trying to look at the situation through Cuban eyes, as well as American eyes."

McGovern said his bill stands a "50-50 chance" in the Senate and a "close to 50-50 chance" in the House.)

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