

Take This Plane to Havana!

U.S. Perceptions of Cuba:

The Hijacking Crisis of 1968-1973

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Introduction

On February 22, 1968, a picture of Delta Airline stewardess Joy Bleil appeared on the front page of *The Sun* with the caption: “Coffee, tea, or—Castro?” Bleil had been held at gunpoint the previous day during a flight from Chicago to Miami by a man who demanded to be flown to Havana, Cuba. She had no idea why he wanted to hijack a plane to Cuba. Once they arrived he was simply led away from the plane and the rest of the passengers and crew returned to the United States. This was the first in a series of more than 80 hijackings of U.S. planes to Cuba over the next five years. Subsequent hijackings were revealed to be explicitly political acts—though not the kind of dramatic blackmail or destructive hijackings that we might think of today. The people who hijacked planes to Cuba did so because they believed that their lives, for one reason or another, would be better under the Cuban Revolution than they had been under the U.S. Government. Notions of race, ideology and politics were all part of the motivation behind these hijackings and their reception by U.S. American¹ onlookers.

These hijackings set off a national debate in the U.S. media over the identity and motives of the hijackers, their fate in Cuba, the merits of Cuban communism, and U.S. foreign policy. After the Cuban and U.S. Governments severed diplomatic relations in 1961 very little communication or travel passed between the two countries. The discussion of the crisis refocused U.S. attention on Cuba over several years for the first time since the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. U.S. opinion of Revolutionary Cuba was divided between the mainstream—which had come to see the new government quite unfavorably—and a diverse ‘Left’—which had hailed the Revolution as a beacon of social and racial equality. These contrasting opinions had been relatively consistent throughout the 1960s. The dramatic nature of the hijacking crisis and the

¹ I use the term ‘U.S. American’ rather than ‘American’ to differentiate between U.S. citizens and citizens of the other countries of North, Central and South America and the Caribbean, who are also ‘Americans.’

confrontation of the hijackers with the reality of the Cuban Revolution gradually forced the U.S. public to reconsider its conceptions about Cuba.

Scholarship on the history of U.S.-Cuban relations is abundant, but most of it only pays close attention to the activities of upper-level government officials and policy-makers. Accordingly, when authors refer to the U.S. attitude towards Cuba, they are referring to the official attitude of Congressmen or of institutions like the White House, the State Department, or the Treasury. This tendency impacts the kinds of narratives that researchers detect and describe. They have told a story of the U.S. relationship with the Cuban Revolution which is precise and valuable, but incomplete. In this study I will show how the hijacking crisis brought about a significant development in the popular U.S. perception of Cuba, and how this fits in with the histories that have already been written.

Background & Historiography: The Focus on Policy-Makers in U.S.-Cuban Relations

From 1952 to 1958 Cuba's government—headed by dictator Fulgencio Batista—maintained policies favorable to the U.S. Government and U.S. business interests.² The country's urban poor and rural population had extremely limited access to health care, education and modern technology, while a few wealthy politicians and businessmen enjoyed luxurious lives in the capital.³ In late 1956 the revolutionary 26th of July Movement (so-named after the July 26, 1953 attack led by Fidel Castro on a military barracks notorious for its inhumane treatment of political prisoners) established itself in the mountains of eastern Cuba as armed opposition to the

² Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic*, 48-51; Brenner, *From Confrontation to Negotiation*, 10-11.

³ Suchlicki, *Cuba: from Columbus to Castro and Beyond*, 119-120; Pérez, *Ties of Singular Intimacy*, 230-231.

regime.⁴ The U.S. Government was unsure how to react to the Cuban guerrillas, who had a general platform of reform, but no clearly stated ideology. Some U.S. officials suspected that its members had Communist sympathies and that they should be stopped, but throughout 1958 it became increasingly clear that the 26th of July Movement—along with urban opposition groups in Havana and elsewhere—had widespread popular support in Cuba and that Batista did not.⁵ Neither the leftist revolutionaries nor the oppressive dictatorship seemed likely to serve U.S. interests.⁶ As the U.S. withdrew its support for Batista, the guerrillas rapidly took over the country and overthrew the government before U.S. officials could formulate and execute any strategy vis-à-vis the revolutionaries.

If the U.S. Government's posture towards the new Cuban leaders was ambiguous when Batista fled the country on January 1 of 1959, it did not take long for relations to sour. Cuba nationalized foreign businesses and landholdings (many of them U.S.-owned), the United States stopped importing Cuban sugar, and the many other commercial and political ties formed during the first half of the 20th century were rapidly cut. The Cubans began forming closer relations with the Soviets, and by 1960 the Eisenhower Administration authorized the CIA to develop plans to covertly overthrow Fidel Castro. The Kennedy Administration carried those plans to fruition in the Bay of Pigs Invasion in April 1961—the operation was a complete failure, and the fact that it had U.S. backing was recognized almost immediately all over the world.⁷ In October of the following year a Soviet missile base was discovered in Cuba by U.S. intelligence, and the resulting crisis briefly captured the world's attention as the U.S.S.R. and U.S. negotiated to avoid

⁴ Ibid, 128-133.

⁵ Pérez, *Ties of Singular Intimacy*, 234-235.

⁶ Ibid, 236-37.

⁷ Welch, *Response to Revolution*, 7-9.

nuclear war.⁸ Relations between Cuba and the United States did not improve much during the 1960s. The three major U.S. objectives during that decade, according to Philip Brenner, were “(1) to overthrow the Cuban government; (2) to isolate and “contain” Cuba; (3) to reduce the Soviet presence in Cuba.”⁹ The Cuban support for other revolutions in Latin America was a major cause of U.S. antagonism in the 1960s, and this fear only began to subside around the turn of the new decade.¹⁰

Scholars generally recognize that there was a thaw in U.S.-Cuba relations in the mid- to late 1970s under the Ford and Carter Administrations, in which the two governments cooperated on relatively uncontroversial problems such as maritime borders and immigration. Due to their focus on upper level administrators and official diplomatic actions, historians often consider this détente to have begun in 1974 with the Ford Administration and to have flourished a few years later with the Carter Administration, when the U.S. and Cuban Governments cooperated and communicated more frequently. Many scholars do mention the hijacking agreement of 1973 as a first step or as somewhat of an anomaly, because Richard Nixon’s vehement opposition to Fidel Castro’s leadership makes it surprising to them that the two governments would negotiate an agreement. Given Nixon’s dislike of Castro, many scholars conclude that the U.S. did not begin to look favorably on Cuba until after he was out of office. Morris Morley, for example, emphasizes U.S. unwillingness to cooperate with Cuba so heavily that he argues “even the U.S.-Cuban hijacking agreement of February 1973 failed to generate enthusiasm to reexamine the isolation policy,” and that “President Ford’s installation in August 1974 did not disturb the hard-line Cuba policy.”¹¹ He describes the increased Congressional support for a friendlier Cuba

⁸ Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic*, 184-187.

⁹ Brenner, *From Confrontation to Negotiation*, 17.

¹⁰ Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic*, 227, 243-249.

¹¹ Morley, *Imperial State and Revolution*, 250-51.

policy in 1973 as “unexpected,” and dates the détente in U.S.-Cuban relations “roughly from 1974-1978.”¹² Though he attributes this change to domestic opposition to interventionist policies, he does not closely examine that opposition. Carla Robbins disagrees that there was no change in outlook during the Ford administration, during which opportunities for interaction “brightened significantly,” but she also sees Nixon’s personal animosity towards Castro as decisive and writes that “the only notable movement was the signing of a Cuban-American anti-hijacking agreement in February 1973.”¹³ Some scholars do argue that the hijacking agreement “impacted U.S. attitudes towards Castro, Cuba, and the U.S.-Cuban relationship.”¹⁴ But the shift in U.S. attitudes is seen as a result of—not a predecessor to—the agreement.

Lars Schoultz provides an accurate, if brief, account of the hijacking episode, but he also claims that the 1973 governmental agreement marked the origin of increased calls for closer relations with Cuba.¹⁵ Philip Brenner looks slightly earlier in the decade, but also focuses on government level activity, arguing that the “movement to relax the hostility between Cuba and the United States first began in Congress in 1971.”¹⁶ Scholars also point to the trips that several senators took to Cuba in the following years, including a September 1974 voyage made by Senators Jacob Javits (Republican from New York) and Claiborne Pell (Democrat from Rhode Island) and two expeditions by Senator George McGovern (Democrat from South Dakota), one in May of 1975 and one in April of 1977, all of which received widespread media attention in the United States.¹⁷

¹² Ibid. 251, 300.

¹³ Robbins, *The Cuban Threat*, 197-98.

¹⁴ Fisk, “Cuba and American Public Opinion,” 310.

¹⁵ Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic*, 258-261.

¹⁶ Brenner, *From Confrontation to Negotiation*, 18.

¹⁷ Martínez, “Academic Exchange between Cuba and the United States,” 31-32.

These studies of official U.S.-Cuban relations are all valuable, but I intend to argue that a shift in U.S. public perception of Cuba occurred over the course of several years prior to the 1973 agreement as the result of the debate carried out during the hijacking crisis. Relatively little scholarship has addressed the opinions and perceptions of the U.S. public, the media, academics and other non-state actors. Given the contention that surrounds U.S.-Cuban relations, William Mayer has commented that

it is surprising that there has been so little previous work on American public opinion toward Cuba. Though there is a long-standing scholarly interest in how the mass public thinks about foreign policy in general, and a large literature dealing specifically with American attitudes toward China and the Soviet Union, Cuba has generally escaped this kind of attention.¹⁸

It is important to study the U.S. public and its culture in addition to the actions of the U.S. Government. One reason to study U.S. views on Cuba is because cultural perception influences foreign policy. The fact that this influence is indirect and cannot necessarily be linked to specific legislation should not cause scholars to shy away from examining this relationship. Louis Pérez suggests that government decision-making regarding Cuba is affected by the same cultural trends that affect the general U.S. public. He argues that it is possible “to conceive policy as an artefact, a product of social circumstance, culturally derived and ideologically driven which, when turned in on itself, can be made to yield insight into the assumptions by which policy persists long after it has been shown to have failed and is without prospects of success.”¹⁹ Public perceptions are also important in their own right, because they are part of the wider narrative of how societies conceive of themselves and of others.

The few works that have more thoroughly researched U.S. views on Cuba address the time period of the Spanish-American War and the first half of the 20th century—they do not

¹⁸ Mayer, “The Poll-Trends: American Attitudes Toward Cuba,” 585.

¹⁹ Pérez, “Fear and Loathing of Fidel Castro,” 228.

reach far beyond the early years of the Cuban Revolution. The U.S. public's perceptions of Cuba during the decades in which the revolution established itself more permanently—from the mid-1960s onward—have not received careful investigation.²⁰ When scholars have discussed it at all, their treatments have been incomplete at best, misleading at worst.

Walter Soderlund analyzed U.S. opinion of Fidel Castro—which he associates with U.S. opinion of Cuba—by categorizing the words that *The New York Times* used to describe him as either negative or positive. He argues that from 1958 to 1962 “the American press” developed and consolidated a negative opinion of Fidel Castro’s politics, and that this perception was ‘consistent’ for the next 25 years, from 1962 to 1987. The fact that Soderlund claims to describe the portrayal of Fidel Castro in the “American press” when he has looked only at *The New York Times* is one of his shortcomings. Another is his argument that U.S. opinion of Cuba did not vary during the first two and a half decades of the Cuban Revolution. The first reason to doubt this conclusion is that (as outlined above) scholars have already clearly described how the U.S. and Cuba had friendlier official relations and expanded diplomatic cooperation in the mid 1970s. For this to have happened without any change whatsoever in U.S. opinion of Cuba seems relatively unlikely. The second and more direct reason to doubt Soderlund’s conclusion is that according to public opinion polls Cuba, as well as Fidel Castro, “substantially improved its standing with the American public from the late 1960s through the late 1970s.”²¹ A Gallup poll that asked respondents to rate their opinion of Fidel Castro on a scale of plus 5 to minus 5, most positive and most negative, respectively, illustrates this development (See Table 1). Another Gallup poll asked for an evaluation on the same scale, but regarding Cuba (See Table 2). Unfortunately, this

²⁰ See Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars*, 1998; Pérez, *Cuba in the American Imagination: Metaphor and the Imperial Ethos*, 2008; Welch, *Response to Revolution: The United States and the Cuban Revolution, 1959-1961*, 1985.

²¹ Mayer, “American Attitudes Toward Cuba,” 586.

second poll was conducted fewer times than the one regarding Fidel Castro. Both polls show that public opinion of Cuba was not static, and that it improved from about 1969 through the 1970s—that is, it began *prior* to the improvement in official U.S.-Cuban relations that most scholars have studied.

Table 1: U.S. Opinion of Fidel Castro, Positive or Negative?

(Gallup Poll in Mayer, “American Attitudes Toward Cuba,” 596)

	May 1964	Oct. 1968	Nov.1969	Feb. 1972	Dec. 1978
+4, +5	0%	1%	1%	2%	4%
+1, +2, +3	1%	2%	3%	7%	14%
-1, -2, -3	6%	11%	18%	17%	25%
-4, -5	86%	82%	72%	68%	49%
No Opinion	7%	4%	4%	6%	8%

Table 2: U.S. Opinion of Cuba, Positive or Negative?

(Gallup Poll in Mayer, “American Attitudes Toward Cuba,” 596)

	Dec. 1967.	June 1976	Feb. 1979
+4, +5	0%	2%	4%
+1, +2, +3	6%	13%	23%
-1, -2, -3	25%	36%	38%
-4, -5	65%	41%	29%
No Opinion	4%	8%	7%

Mark Falcoff offered a somewhat more dynamic view of U.S. public views on Cuba, but focused mainly on the difference between public opinion polls conducted in 1977 and in 1988.²² Other studies exist which purportedly address U.S. public opinion of Cuba during the entire second half of the 20th century, but many of these have used evidence from later or earlier time periods and projected their findings onto the years in between, using very few sources from the mid-60s through 1980. Daniel Fisk, for example, has argued that public opinion of Cuba is generally stable and unaffected by ‘elite media,’ but the conclusions that he asserts for the 60s through the 90s are based mainly on analysis of editorials from the mid-1990s.²³ Alice George’s study on the U.S. public’s experience during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis claims that the U.S. population was affected by that event for decades.²⁴ That may be the case, but an examination of evidence from those ensuing decades is necessary in order to determine the validity of such an argument.

Many of the conclusions that have been drawn about the revolutionary period stem from the facile notion that the U.S. media and public have perceived Cuba and its government in a completely positive or a completely negative light. Sal Landau, for example, has argued that the U.S. news media has consistently and mistakenly portrayed Cuba in a highly *unfavorable* way, while William Ratliff and John Wallach have both argued that the U.S. news media has consistently and mistakenly portrayed Cuba in a highly *favorable* way.²⁵ Scholars such as Damián Fernández and Marifeli Pérez-Stable, among others, have criticized this schism in the work of ‘cubanologists,’ who write about Cuba as “paradise or hell, progress or ruin, democracy

²² Falcoff, “Cuba and the United States: A Durable Antagonism.”

²³ Fisk, “Cuba and American Public Opinion.”

²⁴ George, *Awaiting Armageddon*, 23.

²⁵ Landau, “Cuba: A Half-Century of Distorted News;” Ratliff, “The Selling of Fidel Castro;” Wallach, “Fidel Castro and the United States Press.”

or tyranny.”²⁶ If mainstream U.S. scholarship on Cuba has begun to escape such polarization, the same cannot be said of what little material exists on the U.S. public’s perception of Cuba.

Scholars have drawn conclusions regarding U.S. views of Cuba largely in relation to the context of U.S.-Soviet Cold War tensions. In this

paper I will emphasize how the history of U.S. perception of Cuba influenced U.S. coverage of the hijacking crisis, rather than analyzing it in terms of U.S.-Soviet politics.

Media and Public Opinion

The hijackings to Cuba were extensively covered by the U.S. news media and became a significant part of the U.S. American public sphere of communication and conversation.

CBS news attested to the frequency of the hijackings in its December 1968 report that “it is now SOP, Standard Operating Procedure”

for pilots to contact the Havana airport when a

passenger demands transportation to Cuba, arrange for an emergency landing, de-board everyone when they arrive and answer Cuban officials’ questions, refuel and continue on their way.

According to a 5-page article in the popular magazine *The Reader’s Digest*, “the disturbing thing” about a January 1969 hijacking “was that it was by no means unusual.”²⁷ The hijackings



“Please don’t take me to Cuba. I was only goin’ to the washroom for some water.”

Figure 1
***Los Angeles Times*, February 10, 1969**

²⁶ Pérez-Stable, “The Field of Cuban Studies,” 239; Fernández, “Politics and Romance.”

²⁷ Ross, “Take This Plane to Havana,” 113.

were so ‘usual,’ in fact, that when the problem of hijacking was discussed in the U.S. House of Representatives in 1970 one Congressman began his statement by saying: “let’s assume a traditional hijacking from a scheduled Miami flight to Havana.”²⁸

The hijackings occurred so frequently that they were often the subject of jest. In January of 1969, David Brinkley of NBC news jokingly introduced one story as “tonight’s hijacking news.”²⁹



Figure 2
The New York Times, July 21, 1968

Headlines such as “1st Florida Flight is Memorable: Gets Free Trip to Cuba” (*Chicago Tribune*, February 1968), “Those Unwanted Flights to Cuba” (*Los Angeles Times*, November

²⁸ U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs. *Aircraft Hijacking*, 16.

²⁹ NBC, January 24, 1969.

1968), “Skyjacking a Lark to Some, a Woe to Most” (*Christian Science Monitor*, January 1969), “Hijackers: Getting Less and Less Funny” (*New York Times*, January 1969), and “How To See Havana Without Getting Hijacked” (*Look* magazine, April 1970) show not only that the U.S. public paid attention to the crisis, but that frequency of these re-routings elicited laughter from many. Political cartoons from the time also reflect the degree to which this issue permeated the public conscience.



Figure 3
Los Angeles Times February 16, 1969

The issue of plane hijacking to Cuba even appeared in publications as unexpected as *The American Statistician*, in which a 1970 article analyzed the probability of two planes being hijacked to Cuba on the same day. The question was inspired, the author wrote, by a November 1968 article from *The New York Times* that reported that two flights had been diverted to Havana

within 24 hours of each other.³⁰ The hijacking of planes to Cuba had a large

presence in the news media—it was sensational and it was a serious problem thought to merit considerable airtime and ink.

The widespread and frequent coverage of these hijackings in the news media provided an opportunity for U.S. Americans to express and develop their opinions of Cuba. According to

³⁰ Glick, “Hijacking Planes to Cuba: An Up-Dated Version of the Birthday Problem,” 42.

Maxwell McCombs' foundational work *Setting the Agenda: the Mass Media and Public Opinion*, "elements prominent in the mass media's presentation of the vast world of public affairs become prominent elements in our individual pictures of that world."³¹ Cuba's constant appearance in the news as the destination of hijackers prompted an ongoing debate about the identity, motives and fate of the hijackers as well as their reception by the Cuban Government. This debate expanded into discussions about the merits of the Cuban system and the reestablishment of normal diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba. Hijackings were not the only context in which Cuba was discussed in the news—the Cuban support for the election of Salvador Allende and the socialist government of Chile in the early 1970s is an important example—but the dramatic nature of the hijackings and their sustained occurrence for five years make them particularly interesting and significant.

The Cultural Context: U.S. Images of Cuba Before the Hijackings

The perceptions of Cuba that U.S. Americans formed during the first half of the 20th century and the early years of the Cuban Revolution were still an important part of the U.S. public's image of Cuba in the late 1960s and early 1970s when the hijacking crisis occurred. The U.S. reaction to the hijackings and the hijacking agreement must be analyzed within the context of the history of U.S. perception of Cuba and Latin America generally.

Louis Pérez Jr., in *Cuba in the American Imagination*, traced U.S. perception of Cuba from its beginnings in the 18th century (and especially at the turn of the 20th century) all the way up to the Cuban Revolution. He shows how U.S. statesmen have argued that Cuba virtually belongs to the United States by virtue of its geographic location, ninety miles from the coast of

³¹ McCombs, *Setting the Agenda*, 84.

Florida.³² When the Cuban War of Independence began in 1895, Cuba was portrayed in the U.S. media as a “neighbor in need” or a “damsel in distress.”³³ Kristin Hoganson’s *Fighting for*

American Manhood argues that

the desire of U.S. American men
to defend their manhood led them

to portray Cuba as a helpless
maiden that required their aid and
guidance.³⁴ Pérez argues that

“these developments would have
long-lasting implications” for U.S.

Americans’ images of Cuba,
causing them to dominate Cuban
affairs out of a perceived sense of
selfless duty to put the young and
inexperienced Cuba that they had



freed from bondage on the right track.³⁵ The United States portrayed its high degree of influence and multiple military interventions in Cuba as necessary steps to ensure Cuba’s liberty and prosperity, and the uprisings that opposed the U.S. were seen not as legitimate cries for independence but as the fits of an ungrateful child.³⁶ Pérez also observes how, while Cuba had been caricatured as a *white* woman when U.S. Americans were aiding the Cubans in their independence, Cuba was caricatured as a *black* child throughout much of the early 20th century

³² Pérez, *Cuba in the American Imagination*.

³³ Pérez, *Cuba in the American Imagination*, 91.

³⁴ Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood*, 44.

³⁵ Pérez, *Cuba in the American Imagination*, 94, 95-174

³⁶ *Ibid.* 227-228.

when the island's politicians seemed to be resisting the United States' paternalistic democratic tutelage.³⁷ The image that was consolidated in the U.S. cultural consciousness in the first decades of the 1900s was that of Cuba as a child—often dirty, often naughty, and often black. As the U.S. presence in Cuba throughout the first half of the 20th century became increasingly well-established, the island was turned into “a site for fun, adventure, and abandon,” and “the proposition that the United States had liberated Cuba conferred on American tourists a powerful sense of entitlement; they could do whatever they wanted to do because Cuba belonged to them.”³⁸

This paternalistic attitude towards a Cuba was seriously challenged by the triumph of the Cuban revolution. Initially, the U.S. attitude toward the Cuban revolutionaries was ambiguous. Little was known about the movement until it burst onto the stage of U.S. media when Herbert Matthews, journalist for *The New York Times*, published a now-famous story that romanticized the guerrilla soldiers and described their program as progressive and liberal. This publicity, along with the oppressive and abusive nature of the Batista regime, generated significant support for the revolutionaries among the U.S. population. Suspicion that the guerrillas harbored Communist sympathies ensured that Cold War U.S. America was not overwhelmingly in favor of the revolution, but after Batista fled the country on January 1 of 1959, U.S. Americans were relatively divided in their support for the revolutionaries. A *Gallup* poll in July of that year showed that 15 percent of respondents had a positive opinion of Fidel Castro, compared with 38 percent negative.³⁹

³⁷ Ibid, 138.

³⁸ Ibid. 235.

³⁹ Mayer, “The Poll-Trends: American Attitudes Toward Cuba,” 595. (25 percent answered ‘no opinion,’ and 22 percent had not heard of him.)

The U.S. mainstream became disillusioned with the Cuban Revolution due to a combination of events, including the new government's public execution of many former officials of Batista's government, the nationalization of U.S.-owned businesses and services, the Agrarian Reform Laws—which placed most privately owned land under the control of the new government—and the revolutionaries' growing ties with the Soviet Union. By May of 1960 only 2 percent of U.S. Americans had a favorable opinion of Fidel Castro, while 81 percent had an unfavorable one.⁴⁰ It was in the early years of the Revolution, as well, when Fidel Castro became the unmistakable symbol of Cuba for many in the United States. Cuba was represented in cartoons and in articles by Castro, and the two became almost interchangeable. This is interesting, in part, because it changed the *racial* portrayal of Cuba and the Cuban Government from black to white. Whereas Cubans had been portrayed as black children in the first half of the 20th century, now Cuba appeared as the light-skinned Fidel Castro.

This reversal in Cuba's relationship to the United States was so complete that it caused Pérez to argue that Cuba “had ceased to be comprehensible in the United States. The Americans were baffled.”⁴¹ In order to fit the new order into their perceptions of Cuba and Latin America, U.S. Americans had come to view the revolutionary leader Fidel Castro as an insane lunatic, or Cuba as a Communist cancer.⁴² In the early 1960s U.S. media portrayed Fidel Castro as having ‘betrayed’ the United States and failed to reconcile itself to “the ‘loss’ of a historic client state.”⁴³ Martha Cottam has argued that Cuba and other Latin American nation are considered by U.S. Americans to be inherently dependent. When Cuba ceased to be dependent on the United States

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid, 249.

⁴² Ibid, 249-250.

⁴³ Ibid, 273.

they assumed that it must be newly dependent on an enemy—the Soviet Union.⁴⁴ Similarly, Carla Robbins explains the U.S. hostility to the Cuban Government led by Fidel Castro as the result of “the volatile combination of the Monroe Doctrine and the Cold War.”⁴⁵ The Monroe Doctrine of 1822 was meant to ensure that if Spain should lose control of Cuba, the United States would inherit that control.⁴⁶ As mentioned earlier, I focus more on the “Monroe Doctrine” side of things (U.S. imaginings of Cuba, historically) than the Cold War side of things (contemporary global political factors). The collective memory and portrayal of Cuba’s identity and relationship to the United States that developed over the course of centuries and consolidated at the turn of the 20th century persisted in the U.S. imagination well beyond the 1959 Revolution. This persistence had serious ramifications for the hijacking crisis and ways in which the U.S. public greeted it. Indeed, José Buscaglia-Salgado claims in a review of Louis Pérez’s *On Becoming Cuban* that, even long after the revolution and the hijacking crisis, “Cuba is forbidden but not forgotten. Indeed, most people in the United States seem to be as anxious to know about Cuba as a mother who waits impatiently for news of her son in the battlefield.”⁴⁷

The Romanticization of Cuba

Not everyone in the United States was waiting anxiously for Cuba to come to its senses. There were a significant number of liberals and radicals in the United States who greeted the Cuban Revolution in a much more positive way, to the point of romanticization. Kepa Artaraz’s study *Cuba and Western Intellectuals* examines the history of the U.S. left’s positive portrayal of Cuba, beginning with the sympathetic coverage of the revolutionaries in 1957 by *New York*

⁴⁴ Cottam, *Images and Intervention*, 25.

⁴⁵ Robbins, *The Cuban Threat*, 16.

⁴⁶ Pérez, *Ties of Singular Intimacy*, 40.

⁴⁷ Buscaglia-Salgado, “Leaving Us For Nowhere,” 286.

Times correspondent Herbert Matthews. As shown above, once the guerrillas took power mainstream opinion turned negative very quickly, and in the spring of 1960 a broad coalition of liberals and radicals formed the Fair Play for Cuba Committee (FPCC).⁴⁸ This group was dedicated to providing what they considered accurate coverage of events in Cuba in order to counter what they saw as misinformation in mainstream media and government information sources, as well as organizing trips for U.S. citizens to see the Cuban Revolution for themselves.⁴⁹

The FPCC had membership and support of a wide range of activists and intellectuals, including the radical Socialist Worker's Party, white liberals such as Sal Landau (associated with the activist Civil-Rights solidarity organization Students for a Democratic Society), intellectuals such as U.S. American C. Wright Mills and the French Jean Paul Sartre and Simone Beauvoir, as well as many Civil Rights figures, including poet Leroi Jones (later Amiri Baraka), militant activist Robert F. Williams and reporter Richard Gibson.⁵⁰ According to Eusebia Rodríguez, the FPCC was multi-racial, but "it was the black activists...who were the first to see the linkages between their own realities and those of the Cuban people and to envision the Cuban Revolution as a model through which to achieve an antiracist project that would also challenge U.S. imperialism."⁵¹ The black activists of the FPCC saw themselves as fighting against the same forces as the Cuban Revolution. They considered the U.S. Government's hegemonic economic structure to be the cause of both the racism against which they fought in the United States and the national dependence that the Cuban Revolution had struggled to end. Robert F. Williams put this parallel into racial terms, dividing the global structure in a binary way and theorizing that

⁴⁸ Artaraz, *Cuba and Western Intellectuals*, 68-69.

⁴⁹ Artaraz, 69.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 68.

⁵¹ Rodríguez, "De la Esclavitud Yanqui a la Libertad Cubana," 63.

“the so-called first world is unilaterally white, while the tricontinental...is identified as ‘colored’ by virtue of its exploitative and racialized relations with ‘bigoted Uncle Sam.’”⁵² According to Williams, Cuba’s population was ‘colored’ by nature of its exploitation by the United States and therefore African Americans ought to support the Cuban Revolution as partners in the struggle against racism.⁵³ This contrasts sharply to the way in which mainstream media had previously portrayed Cuba as black (before the Revolution), but which now equated Cuba with the white Fidel Castro. Williams traveled to Cuba with the FPCC early on, and returned as a political refugee in 1961 for several years during which he operated Radio Free Dixie, broadcasting revolutionary messages to the southern United States from Havana.⁵⁴

The African American interest and support for the Cuban Revolution is further shown by Van Gosse in his study on the African American press at the time of the fall of the Batista dictatorship. Van Gosse argues that “in the nearly four decades since the victory of the 26th of July Movement on January 1, 1959, black North Americans have been the only consistent source of U.S. solidarity with the Cuban Revolution.”⁵⁵ African American coverage of the revolution in early 1959 contrasted the persistent racism of the United States with what they perceived as a dramatic leap forward for civil rights in Cuba. The Baltimore *Afro-American* was one source of such positive coverage, stating that “every white man who cuffs, beats, deprives and abuses even the lowest colored person, simply because he is white and the other colored, should have seared upon his consciousness the fact that it is possible for the tables to be turned. Castro has proved it in our time.”⁵⁶ The editor of the *Afro-American*, Clifford Mackay, went to Cuba along with many other curious African Americans and leftists and returned to publish articles that announced the

⁵² Ibid. 74.

⁵³ Ibid, 81.

⁵⁴ Artaraz, 69-71.

⁵⁵ Gosse, “The African-American Press,” 266.

⁵⁶ Quoted in Gosse, 266.

Revolution's dedication to eradicate racism. The Cuban Tourist Commission began to sponsor such trips because "they evidently regarded [black U.S. Americans] as their best potential base of support in the United States."⁵⁷ A January 31 headline for the paper read "FANTASTIC! Inside Cuba—'Will Eliminate Discrimination,' " and New York's *Amsterdam News* predicted "that 'the future looks bright' for people of color on the island."⁵⁸ Castro's explicit attacks on racism both in Cuba and the United States struck a chord with African Americans, and at the same time that mainstream opinion in the U.S. was turning against the Revolution because of its executions of former Batista officials, black U.S. opinion remained positive. African American newspapers criticized the mainstream media and the U.S. Government for the outrage they expressed at the executions, interpreting such disapproval as hypocrisy because no such uproar had occurred when Batista executed political dissidents.

The inspiration that these U.S. Americans drew from the Cuban Revolution continued to play a role in the U.S. perception of Cuba throughout the following decades, but it became much more complicated as the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s gave way to the Black Power movement of the 1960s.⁵⁹ In 1969 the *Afro-American* was still publishing pro-Revolutionary news, including an account by one young person who had visited Cuba and wrote that "identity problems, such as those encountered by American blacks, are almost non-existent."⁶⁰ However, Mark Sawyer has noted that while "many Black Nationalists felt positive about the improvements in literacy and the gains in quality of life that Afro-Cubans had made...others, noting the persistence of racial discrimination in Cuba and the regime's repression of racial

⁵⁷ Gosse, 276.

⁵⁸ Gosse, 270-74.

⁵⁹ Gosse, 277-78.

⁶⁰ *Afro-American*, "Americans Become Workers for Cuba." December 13, 1969.

dialogue, argued that the Castro regime was not innocent of racism.”⁶¹ In order to understand this split we must take a brief look at the development of Black Nationalism. The accomplishments of the Civil Rights movement were important steps towards legal equality, but it became increasingly clear to many African Americans that deeper social change was needed to combat prejudice. This often led to a more militant politics that rejected nonviolence in favor of armed self-defense. The Black Panther Party for Self Defense (BPP), founded in 1966 by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, was part of this effort. According to Jeffrey Ogbar, “in some ways [the BPP] was part of a pervasive and organic evolutionary reaction to the shortcomings of the southern-based civil rights movement and the inveterate nature of racist oppression.”⁶² The BPP glorified urban African American culture and espoused a revolutionary economic, social and political critique of U.S. society in many ways, drawing on the theories of Marx, Lenin, Mao, Fanon and Che Guevara.⁶³ The Nation of Islam also espoused Black Nationalism, those theirs was a separatist movement that did not glorify modern African American culture.⁶⁴

These nationalist movements supported the liberation efforts of Third World countries because they considered their own position to be analogous in relation to U.S. hegemony, and an important element of Black Nationalist politics was self-determination. This element was crucial in the gradual disillusionment that some would find with the Cuban Revolution in the late 1960s and early 1970s, because such race-oriented nationalism was unwelcome within Cuba. Sawyer argues that “revolutionary nationalists criticized cultural nationalists for their failure to consider important issues like class and gender and for their support of right-wing black regimes in Africa. Cultural nationalists argued that revolutionary nationalists’ willingness to emphasize the

⁶¹ Sawyer, *Racial Politics in Post-Revolutionary Cuba*, 80.

⁶² Ogbar, *Black Power*, 193.

⁶³ Ibid, 196.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 194.

categories of class, gender and sexual orientation directed attention away from racial oppression.”⁶⁵ This divide began to grow even before the hijackings began. Robert F. Williams, who spent several years in exile in Cuba in the early 60s, initially understood that the island had solved its race problem, but he discovered that his separatist ideals were not welcomed by the Cuban Government, and in 1967 went so far as to claim that “power in Cuba was in the hands of a white petite bourgeoisie.”⁶⁶ Stokely Carmichael, an important BPP member, also found that the utopian vision held by many African Americans and especially other BPP members was not quite true. He argued that other visitors “failed to see the ongoing presence of racism on the island” and “that Cuba was proof of the inadequacy of socialism.”⁶⁷ This disillusionment has not been the subject of any major study, with the possible exception of a single chapter of Mark Sawyer’s book on racial politics and Cuba, which has provided the basis of the background information included here. The role of less prominent members of the Black Nationalist Movement has not been examined, and the hijacking crisis has also been largely ignored, though a Jane Rhodes’ refers to this connection in *Framing the Black Panthers*, where she writes that “in the aftermath of his Cuban sojourn, [Eldridge Cleaver] told interviewers that the Cuban government frowned on his associations with other black American expatriates, some of whom had hijacked planes to get there.”⁶⁸

Not everyone who visited Cuba became disillusioned. BPP co-founder Huey Newton was convinced by his trip to Cuba in the mid-1960s that socialism was key to overcoming racism.⁶⁹

The BPP remained supportive of the Revolution, and “while the masses of black people were not

⁶⁵ Sawyer, 80.

⁶⁶ Sawyer, 89.

⁶⁷ Sawyer, 86-87.

⁶⁸ Rhodes, *Framing the Black Panthers*, 261.

⁶⁹ Sawyer, 86.

revolutionaries or particularly leftist, they supported the Panthers.”⁷⁰ Even members of the separatist Nation of Islam showed a tendency to believe that the Cuban Revolution had improved race relations more than U.S. society. In response to hostility from whites in Alabama, Black Muslim John Davis told a CBS reporter in 1970 “I wouldn’t expect to be treated this way if I went to Cuba...I don’t think that even Castro, as vicious and as much as I dislike him, would treat me like this or treat the Black Muslims like this. I really don’t, I don’t feel they’d do that.”⁷¹ As will be further shown by an examination of U.S. coverage of the hijacking crisis, in the late 60s and early 70s there was still significant support for the Cuban Revolution among those who were influenced by the romanticization of Cuba that was consolidated in the early years of the Revolution.

It is in this context that the hijackings must be analyzed: a mainstream U.S. public that was extremely hostile to Fidel Castro and the Cuban Revolution, and a New Left that idealized it, but which included a Black Nationalist Movement with political elements that proved incompatible with the goals of the Cuban Government.

Who were the Hijackers?

The people who hijacked planes to Cuba in the late 1960s and early 1970s were a diverse group. They included criminals fleeing the U.S. justice system, people avoiding the military draft; political radicals fed up with U.S. politics and foreign policy; ‘hippies,’ as described by the hijacked passengers; and many black nationalists, members of the Black Panther Party, or African Americans seeking a refuge from the racism they experienced in the United States. Some embodied several of these identities at once. One thing that nearly all of the hijackers had in

⁷⁰ Ogbar, 196.

⁷¹ CBS, March 20, 1970.

common was that they believed they would be better off in Cuba than in the United States (or any other nearby country, for that matter).⁷² Some of them merely feared imprisonment in the U.S., and some of them were classifiable as mentally insane and had histories of crime, but it is undeniable that most voiced political criticisms of the United States and saw Cuba as a better alternative, as a progressive project in which they wished to participate, or even as a social and racial paradise. Even for those petty criminals who stated no reason for hijacking a plane other than escaping punishment, there remains the fact that they perceived Cuba as a haven, beyond the reach of U.S. law and somehow preferable to it.

Plane hijackers were often identified as ‘black nationalists,’ especially by African American papers. Sometimes mainstream news media made no mention of the race of the hijacker, though, as in a December 12, 1968 CBS story. On November fourth, a month earlier, however, CBS, NBC and ABC all reported that a ‘black nationalist’ in a Black Panther uniform had hijacked a plane, and none of them provided any further commentary. At no point did any of these networks interview any African American leaders to inquire into black nationalists’ reasons for hijacking planes. In one hijacking, black comedian Flip Wilson happened to be on the plane and tried to make light of the situation by whispering, “Stokely Carmichael is my buddy” in the ears of the hijackers.⁷³ The association of a Black Panther leader with the hijackers was no coincidence.

One of the most remarkable examples of black nationalist associations with hijacking was reported in the African American paper *The New Journal and Guide* on November 9, 1968, the first year of the hijacking crisis. A gunman describing himself as a “black nationalist freedom

⁷² An interesting exception to this is Bobby Helmey, who hijacked a plane in 1969 but returned to the United States after several months in Cuba, and who claimed his intention had been to assassinate Fidel Castro. ABC, May 31, 1971.

⁷³ *Philadelphia Tribune*, “Hi-Jackers Get Flip Wilson,” March 16, 1968.

fighter” said that this jet was “the first for new Africa” and that “black nationalists are going to hijack a plane every day for the next 100 days to show the white people they can’t keep us down.” A Texas oilman who had been on the flight said of the hijacker, “he was a kook.” Another article from *The New Journal and Guide* described a ‘colorful’ black couple that hijacked a plane: “The man wore a black beret, an orange sports shirt and dark slacks. His companion had an Afro hairdo, wore loop earrings, appeared six-months pregnant and carried a big red teddy bear.”⁷⁴ Nehru shirts were also popular among Black Nationalist hijackers.⁷⁵ Editorial cartoons from the time period reflected these images. (See figure 5)

There were also those on the far Right who saw Cuban Communism written all over the entire Civil Rights and Black Liberation Movements. The *National Review* published an article claiming “evidence has been accumulating over the past several years that some leaders of the U.S. civil rights movement are responding to directives coming out of Havana, rather than to any real desire to raise the economic and social status of the American Negroes.”⁷⁶ The author even attempted to link the Cuban government to Reverend Martin Luther

SOME ARE LIKE THAT

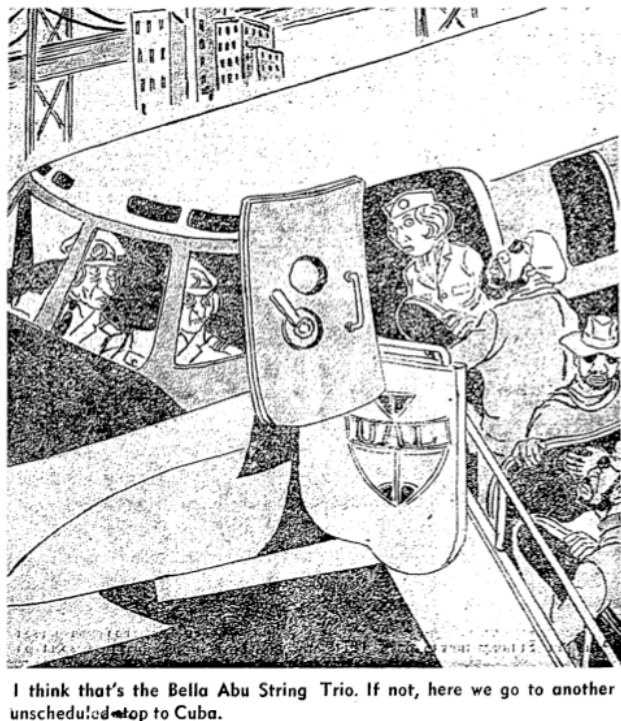


Figure 5
The Chicago Daily Defender, December 4, 1969

⁷⁴ Matthew Kenny, *The New Journal and Guide*, December 14, 1968.

⁷⁵ Charles Taylor, “‘Black Power’ Gunman Hijacked Plane to Cuba,” *The New Journal and Guide*, January 11, 1969.

⁷⁶ Bethel, “Black Power and Red Cuba,” *National Review*, 494-496.

King, Jr.

William Lee Brent was an African American who grew up hustling in the streets of Berkeley and Oakland, joined the Black Panthers and was expelled from the Panthers over a shootout in which he seriously wounded two policemen. Finally, he hijacked a plane to Cuba while on bail and lived there until his death in 2006. In his autobiography, Brent writes, “I knew nothing about Cuba or what living under a socialist government would be like, but I did know U.S. laws had no force in Cuba. I would be free to start a new life: to live and work with revolutionary, socialist-minded people who wouldn’t hold my past or my race against me.”⁷⁷ This statement reflects multiple reasons for wanting to hijack a plane to Cuba—escaping U.S. law and joining the Cuban revolution, which, despite his claim of ignorance, he associated with socialism and racial equality. Even some African Americans who had no direct connection to black liberation movements were driven to hijack planes to Cuba. One man told a stewardess “he was getting out of this country because of the hatred and the prejudice...he was doing it for the little girl [his daughter].”⁷⁸ The association of Cuba with racial equality was strong indeed for some U.S. Americans.

Not all hijackers who claimed to be politically motivated were involved in black liberation. Several were opposed to the Vietnam War and were avoiding the military draft, one was a divorced college professor who went “to help the revolution of Fidel Castro.”⁷⁹ In March of 1969, the *Afro-American* reported on a ‘Robin Hood’ hijacker who demanded money from some of the passengers, but who “took nothing from nice looking people and colored people” and who asked one passenger if he was a rich man or a poor man, and when the interviewee

⁷⁷ Brent, *Long Time Gone*, 134.

⁷⁸ *The New Journal and Guide*, December 28, 1968.

⁷⁹ *U.S. News and World Report*, December 9, 1968.

responded that he was a poor man, the hijacker left him alone.”⁸⁰ After a particularly dramatic episode during which hijacker Arthur Barkley shot the copilot of the plane, his wife told ABC news that this was not the man she knew, and that he must have been “at his wit’s end,” and “maybe in the confusion he figured this was the only way to draw attention. Nobody has listened before, and all this country, this great America, the officials have not listened.”⁸¹ The pilot said that Barkley had requested one million dollars, and that he had planned “to destroy the money, destroy the aircraft, all the people on board, for, this was going to be the price that society, whatever his hang-up was, this was going to be the price that the people had to pay for it,” but Federal Aviation Agency policemen shot out the tires, “deflating Barkley’s vision of striking a blow for the little man.”⁸²

Crazy Hijackers

Despite the political nature of the hijackings, the perpetrators were usually characterized as insane and criminal, and the news media and government officials who discussed their actions rarely considered them to reflect a need for political or social change in the United States. Descriptions of hijackers by U.S. Americans provide us with information about their identities and motives as well as the way the public perceived them. Some hijackers were identified as criminals with no known political goals, such as Lawrence Rhodes, wanted for robbing a West Virginia coal company, and Clinton Robert Smith Jr. and Byron Vaughn Booth, who escaped from a prison where they were serving time for robbery and diverted a plane to Cuba, prompting the *Los Angeles Sentinel* headline “Crime Life Begins at 5, Ends in Plane Hijack.”⁸³ The article

⁸⁰ *Afro-American*, March 15, 1969.

⁸¹ ABC, June 5, 1970.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *U.S. News & World Report*, December 9, 1968, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, February 6, 1969.

did not portray Smith and Booth as activists, but the end of the article reveals that the political dynamic of the Cuban Revolution is embedded in the mindset of the author, who simply fails to apply it to the case of these hijackers:

The decision of Smith and Booth to give up their prison life at Chino in exchange for an unknown life in Castro's Cuba temporarily marks the end of their life of crime in the states. Whether they made a wise decision remains to be determined. Reports from Cuba indicate that Castro either imprisons plane hijackers or else puts them in prison labor camps. At least the weather is somewhat warmer in Cuba.⁸⁴

When hijackers did express dissatisfaction with the United States or a conviction that Cuba would be somehow better, the mainstream media did not often portray these sentiments as the primary motive. Ira David Meeks had served time for manslaughter and robberies and his mother was quoted as saying that "I do not believe he is right in his head," but he also told the pilot of the private plane that he hijacked that he was a Black Panther and wanted to leave the United States because of the racism there.⁸⁵ The first paragraph of the article, however, describes him simply as an "ex-convict."

The *Reader's Digest* also trivialized the black liberation movement's hijacking of planes and de-emphasized the politics of the Cuba hijackings. In a lengthy story on hijacking, one paragraph begins, "there have been some light moments amid the tension," and proceeds to describe how "a Negro hijacker ordered the captain to inform American officials that the aircraft had been taken over by a 'black nationalist freedom fighter' who had renamed the plane 'The Republic of New Africa.' That intelligence was promptly radioed to earth."⁸⁶ It may be amusing to contemplate the mid-air renaming of a commercial aircraft, but the hijacker, no doubt, took his

⁸⁴ *Los Angeles Sentinel*, February 6, 1969.

⁸⁵ David Langford, "The Afro-American, May 2, 1970

⁸⁶ *Reader's Digest*, May 1969, 115.

identity very seriously. The popular U.S. magazine makes not the slightest recognition that race issues might be causing African Americans to illegally reroute planes to Cuba, or that Cuba might seem to some to have better race relations than the United States. Additionally, the article argues that while “a number have expressed decidedly left-wing views...it is by no means clear that political passion has been their motivation.”⁸⁷ The real answer, according to *Reader’s Digest*, provided by the example of Robert Bohle, who claimed to be a communist who hated the U.S. and was escaping the FBI, but who had recently been released from the hospital for psychotic depression. The article refers to the Federal Aviation Agency’s psychologist, Dr. Daily, who describes the typical hijacker as “a man in flight—from the law, from family responsibilities, from his own personal demons. The basic appeal of hijacking is thus ‘ego aggrandizement.’ The hijacker enjoys his single moment of ‘power and glory in a life of failures.’”⁸⁸ Another psychologist, Dr. David Hubbard, told ABC news that “these are a nation’s failure, in a broad sense. Generally either psychotic or nearly so...In depth, he is effeminate, he is basically incompetent in most functions...In a sense, in the moment of hijacking, the man intends for one second in his miserable lifetime to stand, as a man.”⁸⁹

Although the U.S. media sometimes described hijackers as both lunatics and political extremists, and some individuals outside the Left (such as Assistant Secretary of State Charles Meyer) certainly did not hesitate to state that “half the planes that are taken to Cuba are taken I think it is fair to say by disaffected Americans or people of that kind,” most often it generalized them as crazy or criminal.⁹⁰ In early 1969 David Brinkley of NBC described the hijackers, according to psychologists, as “a wax museum of freaks, perverts, criminals and assorted social

⁸⁷ Ibid, 115.

⁸⁸ Ibid. 115-116.

⁸⁹ ABC, May 31, 1971.

⁹⁰ U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *Aircraft Hijacking Convention*, 68.

misfits,” and remarked that “Fidel Castro has acquired quite a gallery of them.”⁹¹ While the chairman of the U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs described the hijackers as “a handful of willful radicals,” the committee generally subscribed to the view that psychological studies had proved that “hijackers are emotionally disturbed often and are not deterred by fears of apprehension,” and referred to the Cuban hijackings (as opposed to the blackmail-oriented hijackings in the Middle East that were occurring at the same time) as “the ‘crackpot’ stage.”⁹² According to NBC news on November 22, 1972, the United States considered the hijackers criminals, while Cubans who commandeered vessels to go to Miami were political refugees.

The Image of Hijackers in Context

The dismissal of both the hijackers and of their positive vision of Cuba as crazy reflects a deep-seated notion that the Cuban Government led by Fidel Castro was irrational and oppressive, as well as a refusal to admit any supposed achievements of the Cuban Revolution. It is important to recognize that part of the reason hijackers were considered crazy was because they had taken over a plane full of passengers and demanded that it change its destination, upon threat of violence. These are unquestionable grounds for suspicion. But even the psychologists who condemned hijackers as the nation’s failures admitted that most were not, in fact, insane according to medical diagnosis, and one CBS interviewer asked the pilot of a diverted plane whether or not the hijacker, who had requested to go to Cairo “to join the liberation unit, the guerrillas, and fight over there,” seemed to be know what he was doing, the pilot replied: “He was pretty rational, yes.”⁹³ The constant emphasis on hijackers as crazy and the generalization of insanity as the primary, if not only, characteristic of hijackers, combined with the de-emphasis in

⁹¹ NBC, January 30, 1969.

⁹² U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs. *Aircraft Hijacking*, 1, 121-3.

⁹³ CBS, September 19, 1970.

most publications of their stated political aims, indicate an unwillingness on the part of U.S. Americans to believe that anyone in their right mind would choose to go there.

This belief corresponds to the original U.S. response to Fidel Castro's radicalization of the Cuban Revolution in the early 1960s. As was shown above, the conviction that Cuba is indebted to the United States for its liberation and requires guidance in its infantile stage of nationhood caused U.S. Americans to reject the Cuban Revolution's assertion of independence from U.S. influence. The hijackers were again challenging this U.S. position, and they received the same categorization as Fidel Castro had ten years earlier. The reality of Fidel Castro's stated willingness to negotiate with the United States, as we shall see, gradually eroded the mainstream's ingrained notions of Fidel Castro as crazy and the Cuban Government as supportive of the hijackers.

What is to be done?

As hijackings to Cuba became alarmingly frequent in 1968, the question of how to stop the hijackings became a key part of the discussion of the issue in the U.S. public sphere. Readers wrote to their newspapers, editors published editorials, the evening news stations interviewed leaders in the airline business and government, lawyers discussed the legality of anti-hijacking measures, and congress met to address the problem. In this debate, U.S. Americans proposed a variety of disparate solutions to the crisis. These included tighter airport security, on-board armed guards, boycotts of Cuban flights, international conventions and multi- or bi-lateral agreements. This debate exposes several assumptions held by various sectors of society regarding Cuba and the Cuban Government. For example, many people claimed that it was futile to seek a bilateral agreement with Cuba on hijacking because they held that Fidel Castro would

never negotiate reasonably with the U.S.A. This assertion shows an underlying (and sometimes even explicit) preconception that Fidel Castro governs Cuba single-handedly and that he is irrational and incapable of compromise. Such a preconception reflects broader assumptions held by many U.S. Americans about Latin America at that time. As time passed, however, and more information became available about the Cuban perspective on hijacking, some of these assumptions began to change, and many came to consider negotiations a distinct possibility. In this way, by examining the premises of proposed solutions and the language they used to describe Cuba, it is possible to reveal the evolving and multi-faceted U.S. image of Cuba in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Given the difficulty of obtaining information about the fate of hijackers in Cuba, U.S. journalists and politicians made a wide range of assertions about Cuba's treatment of the hijackers, especially towards the beginning of the crisis, and these assertions reflect their assumptions about Cuba and its revolutionary government. As more information became available, consensus grew, but not before revealing the effects of the U.S. rejection of the Cuban Revolution. Cuba was described often as a 'safe haven' for hijackers, even by publications that had recognized that the Cuban Government made no attempt to encourage or glorify the hijackers, often putting them in jail for interrogations. This terminology implies good treatment of the hijackers and accords with the widespread U.S. image of Fidel Castro as spiteful of the United States.

Many contributors to mainstream U.S. media were extremely dubious of any possibility that Fidel Castro, who they saw through the lens of historical assumptions as a rebellious traitor, could be negotiated with reasonably. An editorial in the *Chicago Tribune* stated that the notion of cooperating with Cuba on the hijacking problem was "politically naive [sic]," because "if Castro

really didn't like the hijackings, he would not be giving asylum to the hijackers."⁹⁴ When the United Nations International Civil Aviation Organization discussed hijacking in late 1968, a *New York Times* editorial commented that "curiously, the Cuban delegate voted in favor of a resolution condemning hijacking."⁹⁵ That the author found Cuba's support for an anti-hijacking resolution "curious" shows that she or he assumed that the Cuban government considered the hijackings to be of propaganda value, and did not take into account the risk to the lives of U.S. citizens. The editorial further argued that "it is unlikely, *of course*, that the Cuban Government would be willing to try hijackers or allow their extradition to this country."⁹⁶ Thus, the author not only expresses a stance on the Cuban Government, but also a stance on the U.S. public opinion by using the phrase "of course," which signals the notion that few people would likely disagree with the given statement. The best alternative, according to the editorial, is to simply provide anyone with free passage to Cuba aboard the planes that fly daily to the island to pick up Cuban refugees. In early 1969, NBC news also affirmed the notion that Fidel Castro was part of the hijacking problem. News host David Brinkley reported hijacking was difficult to prevent because "Castro will not hand over the hijackers for prosecution."⁹⁷

The *Chicago Tribune* criticized congressmen such as Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield for proposing discussions with Cuba, and dismissed reports of Castro punishing the hijackers by arguing that this was "probably more to protect his own people from criminals and crackpots than to discourage hijacking."⁹⁸ Much more likely, according to this editorial, is the testimony of Florida Representative Dante Fascell, who is quoted as saying that Castro profits from the hijackings both financially and politically, and would surely make no attempt to solve

⁹⁴ *Chicago Tribune*, "Pilots vs. Hijackers." February 12, 1969.

⁹⁵ *The New York Times*. "Piracy and Diplomacy," February 1, 1969.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.* Emphasis added.

⁹⁷ NBC, February 3, 1969.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

the problem.⁹⁹ The author sees Cuban foreign policy as entirely dependent on the will of Fidel Castro, whose name is used interchangeably with—and, in fact, much more frequently than—Cuba. Additionally, the editorial considers Cuba’s foreign policy to be irrational and attention-seeking because it is willing to risk the lives of U.S. citizens for a job at the U.S. Government and for a tenuous reputation as a radical revolutionary refuge.

Solutions to the Problem

Given the notion that the Cuban Government had little incentive to stop hijacking combined with the U.S. perception of Fidel Castro as irrational, Anti-American, and the virtual embodiment of his government, many U.S. Americans initially refused to recognize negotiations as a plausible solution to the hijacking problem. The solutions that were mentioned in U.S. newspapers and television news broadcasts reveal extremely negative perceptions of Fidel Castro and the Cuban Government, in line with prevalent U.S. thinking on Latin American government at the time—irrational entities must be dealt with through force, direct or indirect. As an alternative to negotiating, the *Chicago Tribune* suggested the use of international pressure via the International Federation of Airline Pilots Associations. If an efficient boycott of international flight services to Cuba could “cut it off from most of the outside world until the hijackers were returned to the United States for trial, Castro might be more willing to listen.”¹⁰⁰ This advocacy of direct application of hard power reflects the widely held and deeply rooted opinion that the only way to deal with Latin American leaders was by using either the carrot or the stick.

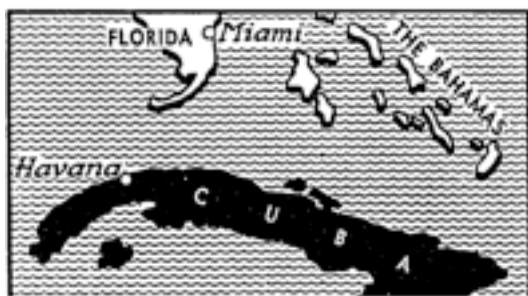
Another proposal published by the *Chicago Tribune* reveals a light-hearted but significant dismissal of Castro as completely irrational and not to be dealt with. This guest

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

editorial suggested that the U.S. set up a fake airport in Florida with “a papier mache version of Morro Castle down by the water and we hang out a lot of signs: ‘Welcome, Comrade, to Cuba,’ ‘Arriba, Mao!’ ‘Yea Fidel,’ etc... The soldiers come aboard, give the gunman warm abrazos and, of course, take his guns.” Then, according to this contributor’s plan, the officer looks at the hijackers papers suspiciously “and in a torrent of angry Spanish the gunman is hustled off, taken around the corner of a wall, and in a few moments there is a volley of shots.” When the hijacked passengers reach their destination, the author argues, their stories will deter potential hijackers by telling them what “those crazy, unpredictable Cubans did.”¹⁰¹ Even the suggestion that one could plausibly imitate the Cuban government by giving a hero’s welcome to hijackers and then executing them by firing squad discloses the author’s conception of Cuba’s government. The image is one of a disorganized, unreasonable and trigger-happy regime only a dangerous communist—fit to be shot—would visit.

While many news sources’ coverage of the hijackings evolved in later years, throughout the first major year of hijackings in 1968 most of them published stories that either failed to offer



By Joan Forbes, staff cartographer

Air pirates' lair

Figure 6
Christian Science Monitor, March 29, 1968.

solutions to the problem (a function of the fact that the agencies they were interviewing had not yet assumed a concrete stance on the issue) or assumed that the Cuban Government would be unwilling to cooperate with the U.S. In March of 1968, for example, a *Christian Science Monitor* article suggested that Cuba might stop returning

¹⁰¹ Guest Editorial, “How to Stop Plane Hijackings.” *The Chicago Tribune*, September 28, 1968.

hijacked planes in retaliation for the U.S.'s failure to return the boats that Cubans were commandeering to flee to Florida.¹⁰²

Figure 6 shows the map included in this article, which labels Cuba an “air pirate’s lair.” Such a denomination does not explicitly claim that the Cuban government willingly harbors hijackers, but the map certainly characterizes Cuba as a place where hijackers can go and stay, and it serves to establish that characterization in the U.S. American imagination. In 1969 the *Washington Post* published a cartoon (Figure 7) that suggests that Fidel Castro is selling the hijacked airplanes for profit. Democratic Senator James Fulbright from Arkansas made a similar suggestion during a 1971 hearing: “I thought they could take them and sell them back. They could confiscate them because of our existing relations, couldn’t they? We don’t have an aid program with Cuba now. We couldn’t use the aid program to bludgeon them.”¹⁰³



Figure 7: Someone is asking Fidel Castro if he is advertising 707s, half price, immediate delivery. The cartoonist assumed that Castro was benefiting from the hijackings. *The Washington Post*, January 4, 1969.

¹⁰² Goodsell, James. “How to Curb ‘Skyjacking’ to Cuba?” *Christian Science Monitor*, March 29, 1968.

¹⁰³ U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *Aircraft Hijacking Convention*, 24.

This comment not only supposes that the Cuban Government might be exploiting the hijacking crisis for profit by demanding money for the planes, but it also reflects the notion that the way to deal with Cuba would be to “bludgeon them.” The ‘carrot and stick’ model for Latin American countries appears to hold a strong influence in the process of resolving the hijacking crisis. Later in the year the U.S. News and World Report stated “very little, officials admit” can be done about the hijacking problem.¹⁰⁴ The president of Pan Am (Pan American Airways), Najeeb Halaby, shared this opinion and appeared on NBC’s evening news broadcast saying that the technology required to screen passengers was unavailable or too expensive, leaving airlines with few means to prevent hijackings.¹⁰⁵ He added that it was too dangerous to arm crewmembers and have a shootout on a flying aircraft, which many “red-blooded Americans” considered an appropriate solution.¹⁰⁶

Some news articles took a kind of middle ground, portraying Castro and the Cuban government’s stance on hijackings as



Figure 8
The New Republic 1969

¹⁰⁴ *U.S. World and News Report*. “Plane Hijackers: Their Fate in Cuba,” December 9, 1968, 12.

¹⁰⁵ NBC, November 26, 1968.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

uncertain. This was especially common in late 1968 and early 1969, since very little information was readily available in the United States about the Cuban side of the hijacking experience. This reflects the reality of the difficulty of communication between two nations that have severed relations, which is an important factor in explaining the wide variety of opinions and perceptions of Cuba. An example of such uncertainty is provided by a *Los Angeles Times* article which reported that “there is no direct evidence that the Cuban government has planned or known in advance of the hijackings; neither has it done anything to discourage them.”¹⁰⁷



Figure 9
The Christian Science Monitor July 13, 1970

A 1969 article in the New York Times provides another example of an ambiguous, and even contradictory description of Cuba’s hijacking stance. On the one hand, the author Richard Witkins points out that some U.S. officials “think that it may be in Castro’s interests to halt the hijacking and that the Cuban leader may realize it.”¹⁰⁸ This is, however, in spite of the fact that “the popular impression here is that the Cuban leader enjoys the influx of American airliners and the

¹⁰⁷ *Los Angeles Times*. “Those Unwanted Flights to Cuba,” November 26, 1968.

¹⁰⁸ Witkins, Richard. “Less and Less Funny,” *The New York Times*. January 12, 1969.

anti-American statements made by some of the hijackers.”¹⁰⁹ Witkins thus provides us with a first-hand account of the prevalence of the kinds of opinions cited above in the *Chicago Tribune*, which suggest a mischievous dictator bent on harassing the United States. Furthermore, despite his indication that Washington officials believe that negotiations may be possible, he concluded the article by assuming that this possibility is a recent and tenuous development: “it just may be that the Cuban leader *will soon be ready* to cooperate in trying to stop this dangerous practice while it is still a subject for jokes.”¹¹⁰ One month after the publication of Witkins’ article, a *Los Angeles Times* editorial made a similar argument, noting the general belief that “the Castro government has not been displeased either with the embarrassment that the hijackings cause the United States or with the landing fees that result,” while at the same time citing State Department assertions to the contrary.¹¹¹

As early as 1969, U.S. news organizations began reporting that Cuba had taken specific measures to deal with the problem of hijacking. This altered the nature of the debate over how to stop hijackings by introducing the possibility of direct negotiations with the Cuban Government—such negotiations would be the first in nearly a decade. In February of 1969, the *New York Times* reported that “Prime Minister Fidel Castro made it easier to fly last week for passengers of hijacked airplanes trying to return from Havana,” and that U.S. officials hoped that this “could lead to further Cuban measures to deter hijackers.”¹¹² Based on this development, a separate *New York Times* editorial evaluated a few of the most prevalent suggestions for solving the crisis: the reverse airlift—in which U.S. citizens would be flown to Cuba if they desired so as to avoid the need for a dangerous hijacking—and international agreements were ruled out as

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid. Emphasis added.

¹¹¹ *Los Angeles Times*. “Another One of Our Planes Is Missing,” February 11, 1969.

¹¹² De Onis, Juan. “U.S. and Cuba: Progress on Hijacking May Open Door a Crack,” *New York Times*. February 16, 1969.

ineffective for the mentally disturbed (as hijackers were often assumed to be) and too slow, respectively. In the end, the author advocated “for the two Governments to put aside the mutual suspicions and recriminations that have poisoned American-Cuban relations for a decade and work together to control a situation that is detrimental—and potentially dangerous—to both.”¹¹³

This editorial shows that some parts of U.S. society did indeed recommend negotiating a bilateral agreement with Cuba, which reveals the viewpoint that the Cuban Government was indeed legitimate and sufficiently rational to justify the reestablishment of diplomatic relations. In March of the same year, *The Sun* published an article on an “apparent move to stem the tide of air piracy,” in which Cuba named a U.S. American hijacker and announced that he had been arrested.¹¹⁴ The author considered publicizing the punishment of hijackers to be a useful psychological deterrent to hijacking and was a key element in many U.S. proposals to solve the problem. Just two days after he had suggested that Fidel Castro’s refusal to return hijackers to the U.S. lay at the heart of the hijacking problem, David Brinkley of the NBC reported that the State Department had announced that Castro was *not* encouraging the hijackings, that the hijackers were “not made heroes of,” and that the Cuban Government might even be willing to cooperate on the issue.¹¹⁵

By mid to late 1969, a debate over the various options for dealing with hijacking had unfolded in the U.S. news media, which had mentioned many times Cuba’s willingness to end the hijackings and to negotiate an agreement with the United States. The lack of consensus on the nature of hijacking and its solution, however, even made it difficult for academics to devise a coherent statement and proposal on the issue. The academic journals that expressed the greatest interest in the issue were law related, and Alona Evans published an article in *The American*

¹¹³ *New York Times*, “Tragedy in the Wings.” February 14, 1969.

¹¹⁴ “Cuba Announces Hijacker Arrest,” *The Sun*. March 7, 1969.

¹¹⁵ NBC, February 5, 1969.

Journal of International Law that addressed the problem.¹¹⁶ After describing the advantages and disadvantages of various measures (including trap doors, in-flight police dogs and Mace), Evans article states simply that “in the absence of diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba, extradition is not available at the moment, although it can be argued that Switzerland, acting as the “diplomatic agent” of the United States in Cuba, could submit such a request on behalf of the United States.”¹¹⁷ The fact that a peer-reviewed journal ventured no further than stating that the U.S. and Cuba might sign an agreement, but they might not, reveals the obscurity of the issue and the difficulties surrounding its resolution.

The lack of information in the United States regarding Cuba’s position on hijacking and the conflicting reports which proliferated as a result meant that when the House of Representatives held a hearing on the problem in September of 1970, congressmen not only expressed a variety of opinion on how to stop hijackings, but also confusion as to both Cuban and U.S. policy. These disparities reveal the various perceptions of Cuba held by U.S. Representatives. The first witness called upon to speak before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs was Charles Ruby, the president of the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA). While he voiced his support for the development of international conventions such as the Tokyo Convention, which President Nixon favored, he told the committee that ALPA advocated first and foremost for bilateral agreements, because they were more expedient and also because Cuban law permitted hijacking and extradition negotiations exclusively on a bilateral basis.¹¹⁸ Since most hijackers of U.S. planes ended up in Cuba, it made sense to focus on a bilateral agreement with their government rather than a multinational accord that Cuba refused to sign.

¹¹⁶ Evans, Alona. “Aircraft Hijacking: Its Cause and Cure.” *The American Journal of International Law* 63: 4, October 1969, 695-710.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 707-708.

¹¹⁸ U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs. *Aircraft Hijacking*. 91st Cong., 2nd Sess., 1970, 7-8.

Despite these statements and the news coverage of Cuba's cooperative efforts, many committee members were convinced that Cuba was a country with which the United States could not negotiate.

Representative Wayne Hays from Ohio, for example, replied that "you can negotiate from now until kingdom come, and you are not going to get a bilateral agreement. We don't even recognize Cuba. How are we going to get a bilateral agreement with them?"¹¹⁹ While he assured the committee that he was in favor of international agreements, Hays was convinced that "you can't negotiate with Castro."¹²⁰ New Jersey Representative Peter Frelinghuysen held a similar opinion, and Jonathan Bingham of New York advocated for international sanctions of Cuba because "it just stands to reason, it seems to me, that you are not going to get the bad guys in this business, to use the vernacular, to enter into those agreements or to carry them out, unless you apply some pressure."¹²¹ After John Stevenson, the legal adviser for the U.S. Department of State reiterated the fact that the Cuban Government had announced their interest in discussing an agreement and that the State Department had followed up on this interest, Florida Representative Dante Fascell still included in his official statement that the recent rise in hijackings "was related to the harboring and sheltering of these criminals by the Castro regime."¹²²

These disparities show how U.S. congressmen were in disagreement as to the very realm of possibility for anti-hijacking solutions. Some assumed that Cuba was controlled entirely by a spiteful and irrational dictator with whom the U.S. could not negotiate, and some assumed that Cuba was capable of coming to terms with the U.S. in an agreement, and these varying views on Cuba shaped their opinions regarding the proper course of U.S. policy.

¹¹⁹ Ibid. 11.

¹²⁰ Ibid. 12.

¹²¹ Ibid. 91, 67.

¹²² Ibid. 116, 138.

As time passed and more information became available, however, it became more common to assert that Cuba was open to negotiations and did not encourage hijackings, despite resilient public opinion to the contrary. The very continuation of the hijackings and their coverage by the media, though, spread and kept alive that opinion. As *The New York Times* saw it, “the frequency of these incidents and the understandably prominent treatment they get in news media can lead the unwary to suppose that Cuba is some kind of island paradise, so alluring that people will use any expedient to get there.”¹²³ This seems to be confirmed by accounts of disillusionment that several black U.S. Americans underwent in Cuba. One man “said at the time of the hijacking that he was tired of the ‘racism’ he found in this country, and hoped to find a new life in Cuba.” At the time this article was written, however, he had returned to the United States, even though he could be imprisoned for over 20 years.¹²⁴ Ex-Black Panther Earl Andrew, too, had been to Cuba and concluded that it was a “dictatorship of white racists.”¹²⁵

Eldridge Cleaver, a prominent Black Liberation leader who respected the Revolution and whose time in Cuba is emphasized by studies of the U.S. Left, found racial equality lacking on the island and “concluded that Cuba’s leaders, in giving public support to the black liberation struggle abroad while failing to complete that aspect of their revolution at home, were guilty of a certain hypocrisy.”¹²⁶ The shift that Robert F. Williams had spearheaded for Civil Rights and Black Nationalism in the early 1960s towards viewing Cuban society as similarly ‘colored,’ in terms of global interests, proved false for some. When they reversed their notion of Cuba as friendly to their cause, they also reversed their perception of Cuba’s race from black to white.

¹²³ *New York Times*, “Hijackers in Reverse.” January 13, 1969.

¹²⁴ *Philadelphia Tribune*, “Plane Hijacker Faces Life in Jail; Ex-wife Glad to Get Child Back.” November 4, 1969.

¹²⁵ Ray F. Herndon, “Ex-Black Panther Scores Racism in Cuba.” *Chicago Daily Defender*, December 1, 1969.

¹²⁶ Lockwood, *Conversation With Eldridge Cleaver*, 19.



Figure 10
The Chicago Tribune November 27, 1972

Cold War politics also strongly influenced the House discussion of the hijacking problem, revealing a strong association between Cuba and the Soviet Union. One representative pointed out that “recent hijackings have been to the advantage of Russia.”¹²⁷ The notion that a U.S. plane getting hijacked to Cuba is good for Russia clearly shows the international relationships that this congressman assigned to Cuba. The Cold War also factored into representatives’ consideration of negotiating with Cuba. Under any plausible reciprocal extradition agreement, the U.S. would have to agree to return Cuban hijackers to Cuba just as they would expect Cuba to return U.S. hijackers to the U.S. Given an instance which a Cuban citizen hijacked his way to the United States as a refugee, Representative James Fulton from

¹²⁷ Ibid. 25.

Pennsylvania asked “Do the free countries want to return that man to quick execution by a firing squad in front of a wall? And my answer to it is ‘No.’”¹²⁸ Fulton categorized Cuba in opposition to the “free countries” of the capitalist world, thus placing it alongside the U.S.S.R. This clearly shows a break with the pre-Revolutionary image of Cuba in the U.S. American mind, which would have considered Cuba a close ally.

Despite the Cold War associations present in the representatives’ imaginings of Cuba, it is important to emphasize that there were distinct elements that separated Cuba from the Soviet Union. Massachusetts Representative F. Bradford Morse’s suggestion that “perhaps we could achieve cooperation with the Soviet Union in this”¹²⁹ illustrates this point. At some level, these congressmen (none of whom disagreed with Morse’s assumption) did not believe that Cuba was a mere satellite of the Soviet Union, because they assumed that the U.S. could negotiate with the Soviet Union, but not Cuba.

Examining the U.S. debate over how to stop airplane hijackings to Cuba reveals the many-sided image of Cuba that U.S. Americans had in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This evolving image highlights the persistence of many U.S. assumptions about Cuba formed as much as a century earlier and provides a backdrop for the development of an anti-hijacking agreement that followed in 1973.

Conclusion: The Hijacking Agreement

On February 15, 1973, the United States and Cuba, represented by the Swiss and Czechoslovakian Governments, respectively, signed a hijacking agreement in the form of a

¹²⁸ Ibid. 65.

¹²⁹ Ibid. 15.

Memorandum of Understanding.¹³⁰ The agreement provided for either the severe punishment or the extradition of all hijackers, and it effectively stopped the hijacking of aircraft to Cuba.

Leading up to the agreement, U.S. Americans called increasingly for negotiating with Cuba on this issue and on others, with the eventual goal of normalizing relations. The day after the agreement was signed, the *Los Angeles Times* published an editorial that concluded “whether it is admitted or not, the antihijacking agreement has improved U.S.-Cuba relations, and it is time to build on that improvement.”¹³¹ A few months later, an article published in *The Washington Post*

cited a Gallup Poll showing that seventy-one percent of Americans “would like to see President Nixon send his foreign policy adviser, Henry Kissinger, to Cuba to try to improve our relations with that country.”¹³² While this article was published in mid-1973, the poll that it referenced was taken *before* the hijacking pact was signed. This disproves scholars’ assertions that the hijacking agreement, along with policy shifts in 1974, marks the beginning of a change U.S. attitude towards Cuba.

Public opinion, however, did continue to shift in favor of Cuba. In April of 1974, a *Los Angeles Times* editorial observed that Secretary of



Figure 11
U.S. News and World Report December 4, 1972
(Hope for Accord on U.S.-Cuba Skyjacking Crisis)

¹³⁰ Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic*, 259.

¹³¹ *Los Angeles Times*, February 16, 1973.

¹³² George Gallup, “Holidays in Havana?” *The Washington Post*, April 1, 1973.

State Kissinger had moved towards allowing Mexico and Argentina to do business with Cuba. Despite State Department claims that there would be no change in U.S. policy, the editorial argued that “more optimistic interpretations are possible.”¹³³ Not everyone was this optimistic about U.S.-Cuban Relations. Even in May of 1972, more conservative newspapers such as the *Wall Street Journal* were still arguing that Castro was showing no signs of cooperation. The *Journal*’s assertion that “there have been no public hints to that effect [overtures] out of Havanans,” showed that some U.S. Americans still refused to recognize actions such as Cuban Law 1226. Passed on September 19 of 1969, the law stated that Cuba was willing to enter into bilateral agreements with other governments to solve the issue of hijacking; the hijacking agreement of 1973 was negotiated under this law.¹³⁴

By the time the U.S. and Cuban governments had moved towards completing a mutual agreement, the majority newspapers, magazines and television news organizations were already expressing increasing support for a diplomatic solution to the hijacking crisis—and even for normalized diplomatic relations with Cuba and an end to the embargo. A Harris public opinion poll shows that in February of 1973, the month the agreement was completed, 51% of respondents favored normalizing relations with Cuba.¹³⁵ A repeat of the poll nearly two years later showed almost no change. When the hijacking crisis began however, U.S. opinion of Cuba had been quite low. Clearly, something happened over the course of 5 years of plane hijackings. For the mainstream U.S. public, the actual signing of the hijacking agreement was not the original impetus for supporting better relations with Cuba. Rather, it was the nearly five years of

¹³³ *Los Angeles Times*, April 22, 1974.

¹³⁴ *Wall Street Journal*, “Dialogue With Cuba,” May 2, 1972.” U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Aircraft Hijacking*, 59.

¹³⁵ Mayer, “American Attitudes Toward Cuba,” 599.

reporting, discussion and debate prompted by the crisis. In other words, the hijacking agreement was not the beginning of a trend, it was a manifestation of one that had already begun.

This study illustrates how two disparate perceptions of Cuba—a hyper-negative mainstream opinion and a hyper-positive liberal and radical opinion—evolved as more and more information was published that conflicted with their preconceptions about the Cuban Revolution. Essentially, the general character of these two groups’ images of Cuba were reversed—mainstream opinion grew more positive and radical opinion became much more negative. I hope to have made clear that these perceptions involved much more than ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ opinions of Cuba. They included factors such as race, ideology, and notions of sanity and insanity. These changes in opinion occurred gradually and were not absolute, but they are an important part of the story of U.S. perception of Cuba.

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