

# Dual-Promise Doctrine: Guantanamo Bay as a Microcosm of US-Cuba Relations

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In the decades since US naval and marine forces first disembarked at what would become Guantanamo Bay Naval Base, the base has stood the test of time, riding out revolution, international crises, detainee abuse allegations, and continued implacable antagonism between Cuba and the United States. Throughout the Cold War, the existence of the base was repeatedly threatened, yet it still exists. The puzzle of how the base was able to survive this turmoil, particularly during the Cold War, invites close examination. This article argues that an overarching policy guideline, unarticulated but closely adhered to, can explain the behaviors of successive US and Cuban leaders toward the base within the wider context of US-Cuba relations. This policy guideline, which I label the dual-promise doctrine, has perpetuated a status quo little changed since the Kennedy administration, where the policy has its roots. I will first provide a brief background of the naval base at Guantanamo and then explore how the events of 1959 and beyond created the conditions for the dual-promise doctrine.

## **Guantanamo before the Revolution**

As a consequence of American intervention in Cuba's independence struggle against the Spanish, the United States and Cuba ratified the Cuban-American Treaty in February 1903, giving the United States permission to operate a coaling station

and naval base in Cuba.<sup>1</sup> Only certain limitations, such as free passage through the base's waters for Cuban vessels and a ban on commercial enterprise, were included. In return, the United States agreed to pay \$2,000 in gold annually. Following the 1934 repeal of the Platt Amendment, the legal document that had originally established the base, the United States and Cuba extended the lease into perpetuity in a follow-up treaty that same year and made the lease terminable only by mutual agreement.<sup>2</sup> In the first few years of the base's existence until US entry into the First World War in 1917, it was a backwater and accommodated only a handful of naval vessels and marines—200 men in total between marines and sailors. The base was obscure to both the American and Cuban publics, entering into domestic Cuban affairs only in cases of revolution (as in 1906 and 1917) when marines engaged in limited operations beyond the base perimeter to secure and defend American lives and interests.<sup>3</sup>

World War I provided the pretext for a large overhaul and expansion of the naval base, with most work finished by 1918, the last year of the war. The United States limited wartime use of the base to coaling and refueling; after the war, the base shrank again and remained on standby status for nearly two decades. The interwar years were quiet and uneventful, with the

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<sup>1</sup> M. E. Murphy, "The History of Guantanamo Bay," vol. 1, 1494–1964, chap. 4, U. S. Naval Base, Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, accessed October 4, 2014, <http://permanent.access.gpo.gov/lps17563/gtmohistorymurphy.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 4 and 5.

only controversy coming in the form of a Cuban farmer named Márquez. Because the inhabitants of the naval base required more food than could be shipped in a timely manner from the United States, base officials gave Márquez permission to set up a ranch on base property, where he sold beef, milk, and veal. Márquez's neighbors, allegedly jealous at his monopoly, invoked the commercial enterprise ban in the lease, and Márquez was forced to withdraw.<sup>4</sup>

By 1938, the base still hosted only 22 officers and 282 enlisted men, mostly navy sailors but also some marines. The growing war scare in Europe and the Pacific prompted a mobilization and restructuring effort across the US military establishment, and an inspectorate board of navy officers visited the island in 1938 to assess capabilities, ultimately recommending a massive expansion. In the early years of World War II, German U-Boats achieved great success sinking Allied convoys in the Caribbean, and the United States strengthened the defenses at Guantanamo in response. As the "Crossroads of the Caribbean," the naval base became an important waystation for military and civilian vessels during the war. During this period, 1,200 marines were permanently stationed at the base and a further 6,000 trained there.<sup>5</sup>

The rapid transition from World War II to Cold War was a powerful impetus for maintaining and, indeed, expanding base operations. The outbreak of the Korean War and the rise of the Iron Curtain in Europe encouraged President Harry Truman to maintain a global position of strength in the face of what appeared to be encroaching worldwide communism. US policymakers therefore placed great emphasis on the base at Guantanamo, and relations with the Cubans on both the local and state level were never better than in the early to mid-1950s. In 1951 and again in 1952, a local mayor and the commandant of the base cooperated to host a Cuban American Fraternity Day,

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., chap. 6.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., chap. 12.

attended by hundreds from both sides. Carnivals held throughout the 1950s on the base complemented these festivities, and money raised during the carnivals went to local charities. Many Cubans also worked on the base during these years; of the eleven thousand residents on the base in 1952, three thousand were Cuban guest workers.<sup>6</sup>

The 1952 revolt that brought Fulgencio Batista to power in Cuba was barely noticed at the base, which merely canceled shore liberties for sailors during the fighting. A visit by the new Cuban minister of national defense to the base just months after the coup assured that Batista intended to continue business as usual with the Americans.<sup>7</sup> As the 1950s began to draw to a close, there was hardly an inkling of the momentous events that would close out the decade. Both governments saw the American presence at Guantanamo as positive, and the local population benefited from employment opportunities and the disaster relief aid the base frequently provided. Within a few years, however, the entire geopolitical scene changed.

### ***La Revolución Comes to Cuba***

The last few months of 1958 ushered in major changes to the Cuban political landscape. A number of Cuban revolutionaries, including Fidel Castro, Raul Castro, and Che Guevara, returned to Cuba from exile in Mexico and began rallying support for an insurgency against Batista, whom they accused of subverting Cuban democracy. The United States initially considered Castro's insurgency a relatively low-level event, not without precedent in Cuban history. US perception changed drastically, however, when on June 27 a group of Cuban rebels led by Raul Castro ambushed a bus carrying US

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., chap. 17.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Marines and sailors from Guantanamo City to the naval base and took twenty-four of them hostage.<sup>8</sup>

Although Castro's motives in kidnapping the US military personnel remain unclear, the decision was quickly counteracted. On July 14, Castro sent an apology letter to the US embassy in Havana but refused to forswear similar actions in the future.<sup>9</sup> On July 18, he released the hostages.<sup>10</sup> Although Castro's hostility to the US presence at Guantanamo was undisguised from the beginning, the speedy and nonviolent resolution of the hostage crisis suggests a desire to avoid confronting the United States too soon, at least not before the defeat of Batista and the consolidation of power. Castro's rhetoric and actions later took on an increasingly hostile tone, but in the earlier days of the revolution, it appears that Castro hoped to avoid provoking a US intervention, which is why he released the hostages without a quid pro quo.

To the alarm of Eisenhower administration officials, the hostage crisis was not the only confrontation between US forces at Guantanamo and Castro's rebels during the revolution. In late November 1958, Cuban rebels seized the plant supplying water to the naval base and cut off the water supply on three occasions. A secret report by the Department of State's Bureau of Intelligence and Research speculated at the time that the move was likely an attempt by the rebels to gain recognition from the United States as a belligerent power or perhaps draw Batista's

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<sup>8</sup> John P. Glennon and Ronald D. Landa, eds., "Document 71: Editorial Note," in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958–1960*, vol. 6, *Cuba* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1991), 119, <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/FRUS.FRUS195860v06>.

<sup>9</sup> "Document 104: Telegram from the Embassy in Cuba to the Department of State," in Glennon and Landa, *Foreign Relations*, 154–55.

<sup>10</sup> Glennon and Landa, "Document 106: Editorial Note," in *Foreign Relations*, 156–57.

forces away from other areas.<sup>11</sup> Whatever the motive, the water cutoff caused consternation in the White House and Pentagon, and the military scrambled to prepare contingency plans to retake the water plant. Coming so soon in the wake of the hostage crisis, the water supply crisis elevated the profile of the insurgency in Washington, DC, and set in motion the official US response to Castro's increasingly successful insurgents.

New Year's Day 1959 saw the triumphant entry of rebel forces into Havana and the collapse of the Batista regime. The Eisenhower administration was now forced to come to terms with the reality of Castro, and many in the administration, particularly the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), worried in memos and at meetings that the status of Guantanamo Bay was in peril, citing Castro's avowed and repeated condemnation of the base. Castro himself threw fuel on the flames when in February he delivered a broadside attack on American economic policy while in Guantanamo City, a location he probably chose for the symbolism to send a message to the United States.<sup>12</sup> However, a propaganda war was all the fledgling Cuban regime could afford at the moment given the relative strengths of Cuba and the United States, the need to consolidate power, and the still equivocal position of the Soviets. These issues did not stop Che Guevara from announcing publicly while on a trip to India that the base would soon be gone. By 1960, the Cuban government launched a two-pronged propaganda campaign for both domestic Cuban and international audiences.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> "Document 165: Memorandum Prepared in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research," in Glennon and Landa, *Foreign Relations*, 272.

<sup>12</sup> "Document 248: Telegram from the Embassy in Cuba to the Department of State," in Glennon and Landa, *Foreign Relations*, 395.

<sup>13</sup> "Document 335: Memorandum of Discussion at the 413th Meeting of the National Security Council, Washington, July 16, 1959," in Glennon and Landa, *Foreign Relations*, 560–61; and "Memorandum of Discussion at the 461st Meeting of the National Security Council,

Back in Washington, DC, senior policymakers unanimously agreed not only that the United States had the right to maintain its base as per the original lease but also that the base must be defended with the full might of the United States against any attack. Just weeks after Castro's Guantanamo City speech, the navy issued a statement reaffirming US commitment to a presence at Guantanamo.<sup>14</sup> Eisenhower himself expressly addressed the matter, publicly announcing that "the termination of our diplomatic and consular relations with Cuba has no effect on the status of our Naval Station at Guantanamo. The treaty rights under which we maintain the Naval Station may not be abrogated without the consent of the United States."<sup>15</sup> At a National Security Council (NSC) meeting in March 1960, Admiral Arleigh Burke, chief of naval operations, presented several scenarios that the Joint Chiefs of Staff had concluded were most likely to occur. Military planners believed that a direct, armed attack was highly unlikely due to Cuba's military and political weaknesses and the sure threat of overwhelming retaliation, but "harassment" techniques were an almost guaranteed substitute. Burke revealed plans to reinforce the marine contingent at the base and pledged to protect US citizens still in Cuba, asserting confidently that US forces could, if needed, move around the island to aid US citizens without serious impediment.<sup>16</sup>

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Washington, September 29, 1960," in Glennon and Landa, *Foreign Relations*, 1074–76.

<sup>14</sup> "Document 459: Memorandum from the Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs' Special Assistant (Hill) to the Assistant Secretary of State (Rubottom)," in Glennon and Landa, *Foreign Relations*, 801–3.

<sup>15</sup> Murphy, "The History of Guantanamo Bay," chap. 18.

<sup>16</sup> "Document 483: Memorandum of Discussion at the 437th Meeting of the National Security Council, Washington, March 17, 1960, 10 a.m.," in Glennon and Landa, *Foreign Relations*, 856–59.

Realizing, as US policymakers did, that a frontal attack on the base would be insanity, Castro took his anti-Guantanamo campaign abroad. On 26 September 1960, Castro delivered a rousing oration at the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in which he lambasted American treatment of Cuba, saying it had been “virtually a colony” and that the base at Guantanamo had been used to promote “self-aggression, to justify an attack on Cuba.”<sup>17</sup> As Castro took his anti-Guantanamo campaign to the international level, the Americans were working at the same level to counter him. Just days after the UN speech, the Eisenhower administration decided to seek support from the Organization of American States for the continued presence of the naval base. At the Department of State and JCS meeting, it was pointed out that the Cubans were fastidiously avoiding using such words as *attack* in their rhetoric that could be construed to have a martial connotation and that any efforts henceforth would likely be through legal channels.<sup>18</sup>

On the ground, Cuban forces erected more fencing around the base and started detaining Cuban guest workers, forcing them to turn over their salaries in order to exchange their US dollars for Cuban currency.<sup>19</sup> In the last few months of his presidency, Eisenhower faced a particularly troublesome dilemma in Cuba with no obvious solution before him. At an NSC meeting in November 1960, Eisenhower lamented that too restrained a reaction to Cuban provocation would invite further aggressive action but that too forceful a response would be a

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<sup>17</sup> Glennon and Landa, “Document 581: Editorial Note,” in *Foreign Relations*, 1071–73.

<sup>18</sup> “Document 585: Memorandum of Discussion at the Department of State–Joint Chiefs of Staff Meeting, Pentagon, Washington, September 30, 1960, 11 a.m.,” in Glennon and Landa, *Foreign Relations*, 1078–80.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*



blow to the international opinion of the United States.<sup>20</sup> Ultimately, the problem was left to his successor, as the US-Cuban drama entered its most dangerous period.

### **Eyeball to Eyeball: Guantanamo Under Kennedy**

Senator John F. Kennedy spent much of the 1960 presidential campaign sharply criticizing the foreign policy of the Eisenhower administration and promising an even tougher line on communism under his presidency. Addressing the issue of Cuba directly, Kennedy accused Eisenhower (and by extension Kennedy's Republican opponent and Eisenhower's vice president, Richard Nixon) of "doing nothing" and "standing helplessly by" as Cuba went red. Kennedy promised voters that he would take a tough stand against Castro and not repeat Eisenhower's "blunder after blunder, defeat after defeat."<sup>21</sup>

The situation at Guantanamo remained unchanged even as power in Washington transitioned from Republicans to Democrats and Kennedy moved into the Oval Office. Cuba still maintained a policy of harassing Cuban base workers, whom they derogatively referred to as *gusaros* (worms), subjecting them to humiliating strip searches and forced currency exchanges. Base workers, many of whom had worked for twenty or thirty years in the employ of the US Navy, remained loyal to the United States during the revolution. The Cuban government reacted decisively, banning all further hiring in 1961.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> "Document 608: Memorandum of Discussion at the 466th Meeting of the National Security Council, Washington, November 7, 1960, 8:30–10:14 a.m.," in Glennon and Landa, *Foreign Relations*, 1118–20.

<sup>21</sup> "Statement on Cuba by Senator John F. Kennedy," The American Presidency Project, given October 20, 1960, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=74127>.

<sup>22</sup> Murphy, "The History of Guantanamo Bay," chap. 18.

On 22 January 1961, just two days after Kennedy was sworn in as president, top policymakers met to discuss the Cuba policy. Although the new administration was eager to demonstrate American resolve at Guantanamo, Chairman of the JCS General Lyman Lemnitzer warned about the “enormous implications” of significantly reinforcing the US contingent at Guantanamo, even predicting that Castro might use such a buildup as a pretext for an attack on the base. He also pointed out that despite low-level harassment, there was as of yet no serious buildup of Cuban troops in the area around the base and that a Cuban attack remained improbable.<sup>23</sup> Despite these admonitions, within two months, a marine battalion was sent to Guantanamo, and the navy stepped up “routine” air and naval training exercises in the area.<sup>24</sup>

In April of Kennedy’s first year in office, a group of CIA-trained Cuban paramilitaries launched an abortive invasion at the Bay of Pigs. Accounts differ as to who bore the ultimate responsibility for the failure of the invasion, but President Kennedy’s refusal to provide air support to counter the capable Cuban air force and the steady loyalty of Cuba’s army are generally listed as signal causes for Castro’s resounding victory, which he touted as a victory not only for himself but for the entire Third World against American “imperialism.”<sup>25</sup> A

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<sup>23</sup> “Document 24: Memorandum of Conversation,” in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963*, vol. 10, *Cuba, January 1961–September 1962*, eds. Louis J. Smith and David S. Patterson (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1997), 46–52, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v10>.

<sup>24</sup> “Document 73: Memorandum from the Commander in Chief, Atlantic (Dennison) to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Lemnitzer),” in Smith and Patterson, *Foreign Relations*, 175–76.

<sup>25</sup> “The Bay of Pigs,” John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, accessed November 21, 2014, <http://www.jfklibrary.org/JFK/JFK-in-History/The-Bay-of-Pigs.aspx>.

classified after-action report developed a few weeks later by the CIA provided an in-depth sequence of events and sought to identify root causes for the operation's failure. Guantanamo Bay was scarcely mentioned, and it appears from declassified sources that the base was not utilized in either an active or a passive function during the operation.<sup>26</sup> In a soul-searching discussion amongst senior Kennedy administration officials around the same time, Secretary of State Dean Rusk said that he had earlier suggested the rebels land closer to Guantanamo and position themselves with the base at their back (thus creating strategic depth), but "military friends [who] didn't want to spoil the virginity" of the base nixed the idea.<sup>27</sup>

The events of the Bay of Pigs invasion provide invaluable insight into the Kennedy administration's overarching policy regarding Guantanamo Bay. From the beginning, administration officials from the president on down publicly and repeatedly asserted the US claim to the base and the willingness to defend it by all means necessary, rhetoric that may have encouraged Castro not to swerve from his nonviolent approach to resisting the US presence in Cuba. Although the second part of Kennedy's policy was less pronounced, it was equally efficacious: limited provocative action involving the base in order to deny Castro the pretext for an assault. This two-pronged approach—the vocal promise of total defense and the tacit assurance of no provocations—formed the bedrock of not only Kennedy's policies but also those of all subsequent presidents. This idea, which I am calling the "dual-promise doctrine," more than anything else, is responsible for the continued existence of Guantanamo despite the odds.

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<sup>26</sup> "Document 198: Memorandum Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency for the Cuba Study Group," in Smith and Patterson, *Foreign Relations*, 431–38.

<sup>27</sup> "Document 200: Memorandum for the Record," in Smith and Patterson, *Foreign Relations*, 447–54.

Cuban acquiescence to the dual-promise doctrine was confirmed by a peculiar back channel between Havana and Washington that briefly existed to facilitate confidential dialogue. In August 1961, Assistant Special Counsel to the President Richard Goodwin attended a cocktail party in Uruguay where Che Guevara was also a guest. Although Goodwin was not authorized to do anything more than “listen” to Guevara, Guevara came with the full backing of Castro and his government, making the late-night conversation between the two men an invaluable glance into Havana’s thinking during Kennedy’s first year in office, after the Bay of Pigs but before the Missile Crisis. Among other things, Guevara reassured Goodwin that “of course” the Cubans would not attack the base at Guantanamo and laughed aloud “as if at the absurdly self-evident nature of such a statement.”<sup>28</sup> This back channel to Guevara, however, was never repeated, and hopes of a rapprochement coming from this meeting were quashed by Kennedy’s determination to crush Castro by other means.<sup>29</sup> Importantly, however, this is the first sure evidence that the dual-promise doctrine represented a satisfactory status quo for the Cubans.

Guantanamo again played deliberate second fiddle in Kennedy’s first major Cuban operation after the Bay of Pigs invasion. Operation Mongoose was an ambitious covert operation to destabilize the regime, remove Castro, and end communist rule in Cuba. The many assassination attempts, psychological warfare campaigns, and covert undertakings ultimately failed, but they reflected Kennedy’s unwillingness to swerve from his campaign promise of defeating Castro.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> “Document 257: Memorandum from the President's Assistant Special Counsel (Goodwin) to President Kennedy,” in Smith and Patterson, *Foreign Relations*, 642–45.

<sup>29</sup> Stephen G. Rabe, *The Killing Zone: The United States Wages Cold War in Latin America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 72–75.

<sup>30</sup> “People and Events: Operation Mongoose: The Covert Operation to Remove Castro from Power,” PBS American Experience, created July

Throughout the events of Operation Mongoose, administration officials again chose a lesser role for Guantanamo, in keeping with the unofficial dual-promise doctrine. Provision was made for limited US Navy/CIA intelligence operations, psychological warfare, agent infiltration/exfiltration, clandestine maritime operations, and, in a foreshadowing of the base's later purpose, holding and interrogating Cuban infiltrators and agents who had broken into the base.<sup>31</sup> In all of these, Guantanamo played only a limited support role, and its involvement was kept strictly quiet. Chairman of the JCS General Lemnitzer and CIA Director John McCone were the two most vocal supporters of this policy, but support for the dual-promise doctrine was not universal.<sup>32</sup> As late as August 1962, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy was still wondering aloud during White House meetings about whether more aggressive action should be taken, including "provoking action" against Guantanamo that would permit the United States to retaliate.<sup>33</sup>

Although Robert Kennedy's suggestion was never acted upon, the Joint Chiefs of Staff throughout the Cold War maintained well-established contingency plans for reacting to potential Cuban attacks. The essence of these plans changed very

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[http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/rfk/peoplevents/e\\_mongoose.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/rfk/peoplevents/e_mongoose.html).

<sup>31</sup> "Document 358: Memorandum from the Department of Defense Operations Officer for Operation Mongoose (Harris) to Chief of Operations, Operation Mongoose (Lansdale)," in Smith and Patterson, *Foreign Relations*, 864–72; and "Document 374: Memorandum from the Chief of Operations, Operation Mongoose (Lansdale) to the Special Group (Augmented)," in Smith and Patterson, *Foreign Relations*, 928–36.

<sup>32</sup> On the most vocal supporters, see "Document 378: Memorandum of Meeting," in Smith and Patterson, *Foreign Relations*, 940–41.

<sup>33</sup> "Document 382: Memorandum for the File," in Smith and Patterson, *Foreign Relations*, 947–49.

little, and the standing orders as of 16 October 1961 are representative. In the event of a Cuban incursion, defined as an unmistakable and sustained armed attack on Guantanamo Bay, the following would occur:

- the base commander had complete discretion to act in his own defense as he saw fit;
- the three main aims of retaliatory action would be to defend Guantanamo, reestablish a pro-US government in Cuba, and restore and maintain order;
- the progression of events would begin with a blockade, followed by a reinforcement of Guantanamo, and finished off with full amphibious landings with a force totaling at least 15,500 marine infantry, a 9,000-man marine air contingent, a 23,000-strong army unit comprised mostly of the 82nd Airborne, and a naval covering force.

The October 1961 plans rested on two key assumptions: there would be no Soviet military response and no nuclear weapons would be required. In the words of the military planners, a nuclear attack “would be a political disaster anyway,” meaning that the stigma and condemnation the United States would inevitably draw from a nuclear strike would far outweigh the benefits accrued by removing Castro.<sup>34</sup>

Castro for his part continued to be appeased, if not fully content, with the dual-promise doctrine. The Cubans committed no serious provocations, and incidents of harassment were limited to belligerent but nonviolent actions against marine sentries. The propaganda war, however, continued unabated, and extensive coverage was given to allegations of territorial incursions by the United States into Cuba, especially from Guantanamo.<sup>35</sup> A Department of Defense estimate in September

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<sup>34</sup> “Document 255: Memorandum for the Record,” in Smith and Patterson, *Foreign Relations*, 638–39.

<sup>35</sup> “Document 390: Memorandum from the Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Hilsman) to Acting Secretary of State Ball,” in Smith and Patterson, *Foreign Relations*, 963–66.

1962 suggested that Castro had between 5,000 and 6,000 troops in the area around the base, supported by defensive fortifications and well-placed artillery batteries. At the same time, US personnel strength on base was 3,017.<sup>36</sup> Taking note of the perceived imbalance, Kennedy took to the airwaves that same month and in a press conference warned of grave consequences for Castro if the “communist buildup in Cuba were to endanger or interfere with our security in any way, including our base at Guantanamo,” pledging that “this country will do whatever must be done to protect its security.”<sup>37</sup>

The most troubling storm clouds were still on the horizon. In October 1962, US policymakers realized that the Soviet Union had positioned a number of nuclear missiles with significant range in Cuba. Under expedited construction and with the potential to hit most of the continental United States, the missiles posed a grave existential threat to national security, and the Kennedy administration immediately convened top advisors to discuss the way forward. It was not long before Guantanamo was inevitably mentioned. At a National Security Council meeting on October 20, President Kennedy queried his advisors for possible scenarios for resolving the crisis. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and Ambassador to the United Nations Adlai Stevenson agreed that Cuba should be blockaded and American missiles in Turkey be withdrawn (both conditions were eventually accepted by Kennedy) but also proposed a withdrawal from Guantanamo. Kennedy reportedly “sharply rejected” this proposal, arguing that it would constitute a surrender under pressure. Instead, the president supported the efforts Chairman of the JCS General Maxwell Taylor, who reported that measures were already underway to stealthily

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<sup>36</sup> “Document 408: Memorandum from the Secretary of Defense’s Military Assistant (Brown) to Secretary of Defense McNamara,” in Smith and Patterson, *Foreign Relations*, 1035–36.

<sup>37</sup> Smith and Patterson, “Document 429: Editorial Note,” in *Foreign Relations*, 1065–66.

infiltrate marine reinforcements into the base, with ships standing by to evacuate dependents.<sup>38</sup>

Marine reinforcements were a welcome sight for the base, where conditions were tenuous than at any point in history. The marines arrived just a day after the NSC meeting. One sailor at the base expressed his relief, stating “I sure felt better seeing those Marines.”<sup>39</sup> Despite the threat of nuclear annihilation, morale at the base remained high for the duration of the crisis. Members of the Naval Mobile Construction Battalion (“Seabees”) completed a series of hundreds of concrete reinforced bunkers “in record time,” and nearly everyone at the base experienced sixteen- to twenty-hour workdays.<sup>40</sup> Meanwhile, the dependents of base personnel, ranging in age from four days to seventy years old, were taken by ship to Little Creek, VA, where they received temporary provisions and medical care. The outpouring of support from across the country was overwhelming; one radio station in Houston organized a Gifts for Gitmo campaign that saw some two thousand Christmas presents collected and delivered to the families.<sup>41</sup>

In a NSC meeting on October 21, Kennedy once again firmly shot down a proposal to surrender Guantanamo, arguing that it would indicate to Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev that the United States was “in a state of panic” and that such a move

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<sup>38</sup> “Document 34: Minutes of the 505th Meeting of the National Security Council,” in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963*, vol. 11, *Cuban Missile Crisis and Aftermath*, eds. Edward C. Keefer, Charles S. Sampson, Louis J. Smith, and David S. Patterson (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1996), 126–36, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v11>.

<sup>39</sup> Murphy, “The History of Guantanamo Bay,” chap. 19.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*



would appear “completely defensive.”<sup>42</sup> Throughout the crisis, Kennedy faced confrontation from not only the communist world but also his own government. The pressure from his advisors and military chiefs, such as Air Force General Curtis LeMay, to attack or take other hostile action was immense.<sup>43</sup> Even his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, who a year earlier had suggested provoking aggression at Guantanamo, was once again in favor of an extreme confrontational position. Kennedy’s tape recorders picked up an officially off-the-record conversation from October in which Robert Kennedy wondered whether “we can get involved in this through...Guantanamo Bay, or something,...or whether there’s some ship that, you know, *sink the Maine again or something*” (emphasis added).<sup>44</sup>

Ultimately, cooler heads prevailed, and the Soviets backed down from Cuba in exchange for a withdrawal of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) missiles in Turkey and a promise never to invade Cuba; Guantanamo remained in American hands. The issue of Guantanamo, however, was not settled here. Several days after the peaceful resolution of the crisis, Khrushchev sent a letter to Kennedy with a plea to close the naval base because it presented a “great burden of a moral nature” and was an “aggressive, not defensive” installation.<sup>45</sup> This immediately preceded a bilateral meeting of top-level American and Soviet leaders on November 2. At this meeting, Soviet First Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers Anastas Mikoyan reiterated Khrushchev’s call for a dismantling of Guantanamo.

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<sup>42</sup> “Document 38: Minutes of the 506th Meeting of the National Security Council,” in Keefer et al., *Foreign Relations*, 141–49.

<sup>43</sup> Joshua Rothman, “Waiting for World War III,” *The New Yorker*, October 16, 2012, <http://www.newyorker.com/books/double-take/waiting-for-world-war-iii>.

<sup>44</sup> “Document 21: Off the Record Meeting on Cuba,” in Keefer et al., *Foreign Relations*, 49–93.

<sup>45</sup> “Document 120: Message from Chairman Khrushchev to President Kennedy,” in Keefer et al., *Foreign Relations*, 309–17.

American delegates responded that the present meeting was to discuss “only one problem” and any discussion of Guantanamo was strictly off the table.<sup>46</sup> The Soviets were not the only ones to continue to demand the removal of the naval base; Castro personally wrote UN Secretary General U Thant expressing his view that any US promise not to invade was ineffective without a number of preconditions, one of which, naturally, was an American withdrawal from Guantanamo.<sup>47</sup> Predictably, the letter met with silence from the United States.

Back at Guantanamo, troop levels were slowly returning to normal. An attack carrier group remained in the immediate area until December 20, but dependents were returned as quickly as possible to assure a reunion with family members before Christmas.<sup>48</sup> On December 11, the first of the marine reinforcements pulled out, and by the end of 1962, operations at the base had more or less returned to business as usual.<sup>49</sup> By May 1963, the Joint Chiefs of Staff had revised their Cuban contingency plans, which now mulled creative scenarios in which an invasion of Cuba with the aim of regime change could still proceed despite US assurances to the contrary. One of the more probable eventualities, they concluded, would be a Cuban “incursion” at the base or a cutoff of the water supply, which would prompt retaliation and “protective action.”<sup>50</sup> The plans

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<sup>46</sup> “Document 133: Telegram from the Mission to the United Nations to the Department of State,” in Keefer et al., *Foreign Relations*, 344–47.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> “Document 215: Memorandum from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Secretary of Defense McNamara,” in Keefer et al., *Foreign Relations*, 538–40.

<sup>49</sup> Murphy, “The History of Guantanamo Bay,” chap. 19.

<sup>50</sup> “Document 337: Memorandum from the Deputy Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs (Johnson) and the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (Nitze) to the President’s

proceeded to spell out that should the Cubans resist (and it was assumed that they would) “the security of the element would justify broadened actions” that would naturally “require U.S. invasion.”<sup>51</sup>

From the Cuban side, Castro was devastated by what he perceived as Soviet betrayal during the crisis. Following these dramatic events, Cuban foreign policy began to take a decidedly more independent direction, and Castro quietly began to put out feelers to the United States for some kind of accommodation. But because he gave the impression that “we [the United States] need a settlement more than he does and therefore we should offer the concessions,” the Americans demurred, knowing that a withdrawal from Guantanamo would inevitably be foremost in Castro’s mind as a concession.<sup>52</sup>

### **Settling for Status Quo: Guantanamo in the Late Cold War**

President Kennedy’s assassination in November 1963 marked the end to the most confrontational period of Cuba-US relations. It did not, however, mark the end of the American dual-promise doctrine or low-level incidents. Under Kennedy’s successor Lyndon Johnson in 1964, the Cubans finally decided to cut off the water supply to the base in response to the arrest of Cuban fishermen who had been fishing illegally off the Florida coast. Instead of responding with force, as had been envisioned in various Department of Defense scenarios or as might have been suggested by Robert Kennedy, Johnson chose to continue

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Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy),” in Keefer et al., *Foreign Relations*, 804–13.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> “Document 349: Paper Prepared by the Bureau of Inter-American Affairs of the Department of State,” in Keefer et al., *Foreign Relations*, 838–42.

his predecessor's policy of limited provocation. He ordered a policy of self-sufficiency at the base that has continued to the present day. Following a truly herculean effort, a full desalination plant was shipped from California to provide the base's water needs, and the Cuban water supply was never restored.<sup>53</sup>

The rest of the Cold War saw various ebbs and flows in Cuban relations. Under President Richard Nixon in January 1974, the Cuban ambassador to Mexico publicly announced Cuba's willingness to resume normal diplomatic relations with the United States in exchange for a lift on the embargo without the surrender of Guantanamo being a precondition. Later that year, two US senators visited Cuba, the first such visit since Castro's revolution.<sup>54</sup> The policy of limited détente continued under the short-lived Gerald Ford administration, but the tenor of the relationship turned cold again in 1975 when Cuba began large-scale support for Angolan Marxists.<sup>55</sup>

In October 1979, the Soviet Union again sent a brigade of combat troops to Cuba, and US President Jimmy Carter acted to assert American resolve, ordering a massive amphibious landing drill with the 38th Marine Amphibious Landing.<sup>56</sup> Although Carter's successor Ronald Reagan is today renowned as a hardened cold warrior, the Reagan administration's Cuba policy was remarkably restrained and even lukewarm, especially in

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<sup>53</sup> Murphy, "The History of Guantanamo Bay," chap. 21.

<sup>54</sup> John Pomfret, "The History of Guantanamo Bay," vol. 2, 1964–1982, chap. 5, U. S. Naval Base, Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, accessed October 4, 2014, <http://permanent.access.gpo.gov/lps17563/gtmohistorymurphy.htm>.

<sup>55</sup> Piero Gleijeses, "The View from Havana: Lessons from Cuba's Africa Journey, 1959–1976," in *In from the Cold: Latin America's New Encounter With the Cold War*, eds. Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniela Spenser (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 112–33.

<sup>56</sup> Pomfret, "The History of Guantanamo Bay," chap. 4.

comparison to action elsewhere in Latin America. A number of naval exercises, rhetorical broadsides, and a resumption of high-flying airplane surveillance of the island was the extent to which Reagan moved against Castro, and relations were not altered significantly under his tenure. By the end of Reagan's term, he even received praise from Castro as a "realistic" president who "might be trying to go down in history as a peaceful president," which are surprising words indeed from a man who had earlier compared Reagan to the Nazis.<sup>57</sup>

With the end of the Cold War, relations at the local level became more muted than in the past; despite state-level hostility, disputes at the local level have been few. Occasional diplomatic flare-ups like the defection of two Cuban Air Force pilots in 1993 have been the only serious obstacle to normal working relations between the base and local Cuban entities. In addition to the pilots, there is a larger movement of refugees and defectors, many of whom try to escape Cuba's minefields and penetrate the "Cactus Curtain" (a ring of cacti planted around Guantanamo by Castro's soldiers) but are shot on sight or attacked with grenades by Cuban forces.<sup>58</sup> The most recent use for the base as a detention facility hosting terrorists apprehended as part of the US War on Terror has surprisingly not created waves in Castro's Cuba. When the facility opened shortly after the American invasion of Afghanistan, the Cubans registered protest only that the detainees might escape and enter Cuban

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<sup>57</sup> Antonio R. de la Cova, "US-Cuba Relations During the Cold War," in *President Reagan and the World*, eds. Eric J. Schmertz, Natalie Datlof, and Alexej Ugrinsky (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997), 381–91.

<sup>58</sup> Ana Arana and Lisa Ocker, "2nd Cuban Pilot in 6 Days Defects," *Sun Sentinel*, September 24, 1993, [http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/1993-09-24/news/9309240107\\_1\\_ken-tota-cuban-exiles-cuban-patrol-boats](http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/1993-09-24/news/9309240107_1_ken-tota-cuban-exiles-cuban-patrol-boats).

territory and have not expressed concern at their treatment, according to a 2002 newspaper article.<sup>59</sup>

## Conclusion

In more recent years, relations between the United States and Cuba are perhaps better than ever. Monthly meetings bring together the commandant of the base and the commander of local Cuban forces to discuss issues of mutual interest, and each side sends courtesy emails to inform the other side of major actions being undertaken so as not to create undiplomatic surprises.<sup>60</sup> The Kennedy conception of the dual-promise doctrine has persisted across administrations, parties, and generations and continues to form the bedrock of US and Cuban policies. The base has become more valuable to the Cuban government as a tool of propaganda than as actual territory itself, and it is not in Cuba's interest to see that situation change. The customary rhetoric has not abated—new President Raul Castro railed against the “usurped” territory in a speech shortly after assuming power from his ailing brother—and the Cubans continue to refuse to cash the checks sent by the United States as payment for the lease.<sup>61</sup> The immense propaganda value that the US presence affords, along with the unmistakable preponderance of force on the US side, is responsible perhaps more than anything else for Cuba's continued adherence to the dual-promise doctrine. In 2012, the last two native Cuban

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<sup>59</sup> Ron Martz, “Navy Base has Reached Odd Détente with Cuba,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, February 10, 2002, A13.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Marc Lacey, “In the City of Guantánamo, Locals Adapt to Life with an Unwelcome Neighbor,” *The New York Times*, August 11, 2008, [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/12/world/americas/12cuba.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/12/world/americas/12cuba.html?_r=0).

workers on the base, aged 79 and 82, finally retired, marking the end of an era.<sup>62</sup>

For US military personnel and their families, life at America's naval base at Guantanamo continues much as it has for over a hundred years, and the base has endured despite all odds through one international crisis after another. Guantanamo's continued existence is ultimately due to a careful balancing act on both sides of the Cactus Curtain. US doctrine, first established by President Kennedy, balanced a limitation on provocations from the base with an iron guarantee of defense in the face of aggression. Cuba, for its part, has had to balance a propaganda war of immense value without provoking the Americans too much, and the result has been a strange but durable detente.

## Postscript

President Barack Obama's bombshell 17 December 2014 announcement that the United States and Cuba were working to normalize relations suddenly thrust Guantanamo Bay back into international headlines. For the first time since the beginning of the War on Terror, however, scrutiny of the naval base is leveled not at the terrorist detention facility but at the status of the base itself. Eighteen months of secret negotiations between Cuba and the United States, which resulted in a "spy-swap" arrangement for jailed intelligence personnel and the release of Cuban political prisoners, apparently did not definitively resolve the Guantanamo question.<sup>63</sup> A White House fact sheet released in the wake of the announcement made no mention of the base,

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<sup>62</sup> Suzette Laboy and Ben Fox, "Era Ends: Base's Last Two Cuban Commuters Retire," *Miami Herald*, December 14, 2012, <http://www.miamiherald.com/incoming/article1945464.html>.

<sup>63</sup> Warren Strobel, Matt Spetalnick, and David Adams, "How Obama Outmaneuvered Hardliners and Cut a Cuba Deal," *Reuters*, March 23, 2015.

but Raul Castro's January 28 demand for a return to full Cuban sovereignty has created an elephant in the room.<sup>64</sup>

The White House was quick to rule out any transfer, stating unequivocally on February 4 that the base would remain in US hands and radio and television programs being broadcast from base soil into Cuba would continue unaffected.<sup>65</sup> This represents the strongest Obama-era defense of the base to date and is almost certainly a reaction to bipartisan domestic opposition to diplomatic relations, as well as a healthy sense of caution in uncharted waters. Neither Obama, already under attack for his foreign policy decisions, nor Castro, who is known for his slow and steady pace of reform, are yet willing to place all of the cards on the table. Despite much progress thus far—including the exchange of ambassadors, loosening of trade restrictions, and liberalization of banking and remittance policy—both sides suffer from a fundamental mistrust of the other, a product of five decades of antagonism. This attitude was captured succinctly by aging ex-President Fidel Castro, who while not condemning the deal publicly expressed his mistrust of US policy.<sup>66</sup>

For all his bluster about a rapprochement not “mak[ing] any sense” without a return of Guantanamo, Raul Castro is likely engaging in political showmanship when he demands the base as a precondition to further normalization.<sup>67</sup> Because such a

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<sup>64</sup> “Fact Sheet: Charting a New Course on Cuba,” Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, December 17, 2014, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/12/17/fact-sheet-charting-new-course-cuba>; and Douglas Ernst, “Raul Castro Demands U.S. Return Control of Guantanamo Bay,” *Washington Times*, January 28, 2015.

<sup>65</sup> Patricia Zengerle, “U.S. Official: Guantanamo ‘not on Table’ in Cuba Talks,” *Reuters*, February 4, 2015.

<sup>66</sup> “Fidel Castro: I Do Not Trust US, but Talks Needed for Peace,” *The Telegraph*, January 27, 2015.

<sup>67</sup> Alastair Jamieson, “Raul Castro Demands Return of Guantanamo Bay, End of Trade Embargo,” NBC News, January 29, 2015,



handover was not a part of the originally announced agreement, it is unclear whether US policy will waver on this issue. If Castro is able to sense the historical significance of the moment, he may very well back down from his threats and settle for the already attractive package agreed upon by the two countries. Alternatively, he may continue to insist for the base's return after over a century of American rule. Although it is impossible to make predictions with any accuracy, the dual-promise doctrine itself may ultimately become a victim of the new rapprochement, as leaders on both sides learn to chart a new path forward.

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<http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/u-s-cuba-relations/raul-castro-demands-return-guantanamo-bay-end-trade-embargo-n295886>.