

A Review of

***THAT INFERNAL LITTLE CUBAN REPUBLIC:
THE UNITED STATES AND THE CUBAN REVOLUTION***

Lars Schoultz, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009)

by Matt Jacobs, Ohio University

In January 1959, after waging a three year guerilla war, Fidel Castro took power on the island of Cuba. The Cuban Revolution completely altered the internal structure of the island and had international ramifications that reverberated from Havana to Washington. In *That Infernal Little Republic* Lars Schoultz traces U.S.-Cuban relations from the onset of the revolution in 1959 to the present. Utilizing extensive U.S. documents and secondary sources Schoultz delves into U.S. attempts to understand and counter Fidel Castro's revolution in Cuba. To Schoultz, the nature of U.S.-Cuban relations as evidenced by their the Bay of Pigs, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the end of the Cold War "Washington's civilizing mission remains a constant" (7). Schoultz argues that U.S. policymakers consistently viewed Cuba as an island in need of U.S. assistance. As a consequence, the United States' benevolent attitude towards Castro's revolution created an atmosphere that has led to a longstanding feud between the two nations.

That Infernal Little Republic begins with pre-revolution U.S.-Cuban relations. Schoultz highlights that from the beginning tension was common in U.S. interactions with Cuba. During the 1930s and 1940s, as U.S. policymakers hoped for stability in Cuba, Presidents Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman consistently supported undemocratic elements inside Cuba. The prime beneficiary of U.S. support was General Fulgencio Batista. While U.S. relations with Batista are an important aspect of the pre-revolution period, Schoultz does a good job of discussing how U.S. support for Batista affected the Cuban citizenry. The political, economic, and social situation led many Cubans, to hunger for drastic change on the island.

That change came in January 1959 when Castro, along with younger brother Raul and Argentine Ernesto "Che" Guevara, ousted Fulgencio Batista in Cuba. Almost immediately a fracture was evident in U.S. policy towards the new Castro regime. While members of the State Department, particularly those serving in the Embassy in Havana, wanted to take a 'wait and see' approach, other members of the Dwight Eisenhower administration were not as optimistic. As Schoultz notes, "...other voices immediately took a darker view. By early February, the CIA was worrying about the 'relative youth and inexperience of a great many top leaders' (87). Ultimately, the combination of U.S. economic interests, Castro's anti-American stance, and the United States' unwillingness to allow the U.S.-Cuban relationship to be re-constituted led to the termination of U.S.-Cuban relations.

Once official relations ended the United States and Cuba entered into open hostilities towards one another. Schoultz's chapters on the administration of John Kennedy specifically focuses on U.S. attempts to subvert Castro's influence inside Cuba. Kennedy, after being advised by Eisenhower, signed off on the disastrous Bay of Pigs disaster. Kennedy's successor, Lyndon Johnson, shied away from covert action against Castro. In a telephone conversation early in his presidency, Johnson confided to Senator William Fulbright that he was not interested in getting involved with another Bay of Pigs but wanted to know what the United States could do "to pinch their nuts more than we're doing" (214). Schoultz posits that U.S.

policy towards Cuba during Lyndon Johnson's time in the White House proved rather stagnant, primarily due to the U.S. focus on events in Southeast Asia.

The last few chapters of this work are most fascinating for those interested in contemporary issues in U.S.-Cuban relations and current trends in international affairs. When examining U.S. policy during the Reagan years, Schoultz argues that U.S. consistently viewed Cuba as little more than a Soviet pawn. U.S. actions, including assisting the Contras in Nicaragua and invading Grenada, were predicated on Cuba's following orders from the Soviet Union. Schoultz closes his chapter on U.S. policy during the Reagan years stating "U.S.-Cuban relations started off bad and stayed bad" (418).

The end of the Cold War and the United States' reluctance to reach out to Castro's Cuba epitomized Schoultz argument on Washington's "civilizing mission." In 1992 President George H.W. Bush declared that "we are closer than ever to our goal of returning freedom to Cuba" (432). The president's pronouncement made it clear that U.S. policymakers believed it was the United States' mission to return freedom to Cubans. Ultimately, post Cold War U.S. policy differed very little from previous decades.

For Schoultz, both Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush failed to enact any sweeping changes to the U.S. stance towards Castro's Cuba. He notes that early in the Clinton administration many officials believed "that the Castro government was about to collapse of its own accord" (461). That belief never came to fruition and, "so President Clinton ended his eight-year tenure with one final expression of what appeared to be genuine disappointment: 'I wish we could have done better'" (514). When focused on George W. Bush, towards the end of his presidency, Schoultz finds that the second Bush President closely echoed his father's sentiments from 1992. During a speech he reminded listeners about "how much work the United States has to do to help the people of Cuba realize the blessings of liberty," (552) once again assuming it was the role of Americans to lead Cubans to freedom.

Overall, Schoultz provides a significant contribution to the history and study of U.S.-Cuban relations and published on the fiftieth anniversary of the Cuban Revolution, this work is certainly timely. Students of U.S. foreign policy as well as policymakers in Washington would be well served to read this book. Schoultz argument that U.S. policymakers need to focus less on uplifting Cubans and more on treating Cuba with respect is provocative and well thought out. He notes that "Cubans repeatedly insisted on being treated as anyone would like to be treated by their neighbors—that is, as equals and with respect" (553). In stark prose Schoultz concludes that "Perhaps if Washington were to concentrate on controlling its compulsion to uplift, which to Cubans is clearly an especially annoying defect, then the citizens of that infernal little republic might be a little less irritating, a little more willing to accommodate legitimate U.S. interests" (567).