

Manufacturing the Enemy

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The Media War
Against Cuba

Keith Bolender

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To Rose and Reg Wish you were here

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Introduction

When Fidel Castro and his idealistic band of revolutionaries emerged triumphant in the early days of 1959, the United States soon determined that this nationalist movement could not be tolerated. American hegemony over Cuba, which they had maintained over the previous 60 years, was being threatened, and as Fidel Castro began implementing his new social/economic order, policies for regime change were implemented.

A variety of methods were unleashed to destroy the revolution. Isolation, restrictions preventing American citizens from traveling to Cuba, hundreds of acts of terrorism against civilian and commercial targets, an economic blockade with extra-territorial application, assassination attempts against Castro and other leadership figures, even an exile-led invasion were all utilized. In one form or the other, aspects of this siege against Cuba continue to this day.¹

One of the longest-standing expressions of this antagonism derives from an institution usually recognized as separate from the state in a modern liberal democracy—that of an independent press. In fact, the mass media has enthusiastically endorsed the government's counter-revolutionary objectives to end Cuba's socialist experiment and force the country to return into America's embrace. The media's role has been foremost to propagandize the revolution in the most negative forms, resulting in the normalization of the demonization of the Cuban revolution and its supporters. Media has led the inexorable march toward creating a critical narrative that does not stand up to honest scrutiny.

Misinformation has been responsible for the preponderance of negative myths about Cuba. When myth replaces history, facts become immaterial to rational discussion. It is the means by which the worst charges against revolutionary society are believed and any attempt at authentic examination is denied. Corporate media's single-mindedness has been well served.

After an initial honeymoon period when the press was inclined to portray Castro and the revolutionaries in a relatively sympathetic form, in contrast to the universally loathed dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista, the tone turned dark. America had expected reform from Castro; instead, he gave them revolution. Once Fidel Castro started making good on his promises—which inevitably confronted American imperial interests—there was little doubt how public opinion would be shifted. Less than a year after the triumph and ever since, the most influential national media outlets have attempted to frame the Cuban Revolution as an unmitigated failure, a social evil that had done nothing positive for the people. Every mistake has been amplified, every misstep condemned as proof of the inadequacies of the movement. Every success diminished or ignored, every gain criticized in a self-constructed comparison that continually holds Cuba up to a higher standard few other nations are subjected to.

According to the rhetorical trappings the mainstream media has utilized for the past 50 years, little benefit has emerged from the revolution, while all shortfalls are solely the responsibility of the system—rarely putting into context the impact America’s non-stop strategy of regime change has had on the island government’s well-documented shortcomings. A self-imposed censorship has been applied so as not to disseminate essential information regarding this unrelenting hostility against Cuba, nor to provide background to America’s historic imperial designs. Remarkably, the lack of self-awareness of this reality often reaches top government spokespeople, including President Donald Trump’s press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders, who claimed in 2018 that the United States does not, “get to dictate how other countries operate.”² It might be worthwhile to let the Cubans in on that revelation.

Media developed its Cuba posture in obedience to Washington’s designation of the revolution as illegitimate. Once the ruling elites came out in bipartisan voice declaring Fidel Castro an enemy, the press went about slanting its coverage in conformity with foreign policy objectives. Destabilization, subversion and economic warfare have been the tools of regime change policy used by the US government; the media has willingly helped forge them. There was no effort to examine the revolution as a popular expression of

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true Cuban nationalism. The only explanation provided was one that alleged Fidel Castro was a master manipulator who had duped the Cuban people down the path to anti-Americanism, and then worse, communism. Consequently, politicians and media refused to understand the historical roots for revolution, as they could not admit it was United States' hegemony over Cuba that formed much of its basis. The dictator Batista might have been the lightning rod, but the storm against neo-colonialism had been brewing long before. Fidel Castro was the tempest that swept it all away.

Taking up the anti-American label became standard coverage as relations between the two former friends worsened. When the revolution moved into the Soviet Union sphere,³ all the press needed was to put the word 'communist' in front of Cuba and everyone recognized the adverse implications. There was no longer any question as to the media's coverage of the island nation. It didn't matter what was being reported—from politics, tourism, health care or sports—if it was about Cuba, then editorial boardrooms across America would set parameters establishing how much positive and negative treatment would be standardized—and in the clear majority it was deleterious. Articles regarding new tourist facilities would invariably include denigrating observations of the lack of amenities. Cuba's international success in sports would turn to athletes 'defecting'; universal health care would inform at length the deficiencies in infrastructure; attempts at creating housing disparaged by emphasizing the lack of resources.⁴ Little credited, much discredited.

A favorite ploy of the media is to offer expert opinions on how to fix the serious economic problems Cuba faces, while consistently ignoring America's debilitating economic embargo. A number of national outlets reported on the Brookings Institute's comprehensive 2018 study on Cuba's economy and the measures needed to improve it; the report not once mentioned the impact of US restrictions.⁵ Brookings is one of a handful of influential think-tanks that both state and media elite defer to when either developing foreign policies or reporting in support of them. If the embargo (referred to as a "blockade" in Cuba for its extra-territorial economic, financial and commercial application) is mentioned, it is often

to offer dubious justifications as to why it should remain, as in the 2014 editorial by the *Washington Post*.⁶ And when reporting on Cuba's political structure, there is no effort to disguise the contempt the media holds with what is invariably described as a "non-democratic" system because it does not conform to capitalist imposed definitions.⁷

This bias has been apparent since the earliest days of the revolution. Following Fidel Castro's nationalization of farmland and industrial property, condemnation was based on the supposed lack of compensation. Conveniently ignored in the press was that the Cuban government offered payment, a proposal that was refused on the orders of the US government.⁸ Thanks to the media's calculated withholding of the facts, to this day the perception is that the property was confiscated illegally, that Cuba owes billions in reparations.⁹ Fidel Castro's move into the Soviet Union sphere in the 1960s can be considered a consequence of the regime change policies that included the embargo and America's strong-arming other nations not to do business with Cuba.¹⁰ None of this has ever been covered in any depth. There was virtually no news of Havana's constant complaints to Washington to prevent the illegal overflights of Florida-based Brothers to the Rescue (BTTR) during the rafter crises of 1996. When Cuba took action and shot down two small aircrafts after more than a dozen incursions over national airspace, the only reporting would lead one to believe it was an unprovoked attack based on a single incident.¹¹ A consumer of mainstream media would also be hard pressed to discover that the head of Brothers to the Rescue, José Basulto, has a long history of terrorist acts against Cuban civilian targets.¹² After five Cuban intelligence agents were sent to infiltrate BTTR and other anti-revolutionary groups based in South Florida to try and prevent future acts of terrorism, the only reaction from the press was condemning the Cuban Five as spies deserving of their unjustly long sentences. As an outcome of the case, it was revealed that a number of high profile journalists from the *Miami Herald* and the Spanish-language version *Nuevo Herold* were paid by the US government to write damaging reports leading up to the trial, while at the same time conducting anti-Cuban propaganda on Miami-based Radio Televisión Martí.¹³ According to Florida-based media critic Álvaro

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Fernández, this breach of journalistic ethics helped ensure the Five would have no chance at a fair trial in Miami.

They were doing stories for Radio and TV Martí¹⁴ at the same time they were writing for the Herald on the same subject. Any American journalist worth his weight knows you've crossed a line if you are being paid by the government to write stories with a particular slant.¹⁵

Under the Office of Cuba Broadcasting (OCB), Radio Televisión Martí has cost US taxpayers millions since the 1980s, when the Reagan administration permitted the distribution of propaganda into Cuba. The anti-revolutionary media outlets have previously faced charges of misappropriation of funds and mismanagement.¹⁶ It also seems that Radio Televisión Martí does not limit its propaganda solely against Cuba. A report by *Mother Jones* indicated that a negative video segment in May 2018 against liberal George Soros was produced by the US-funded network. Soros, described in the report as a “multimillionaire Jew” and “the architect of the financial collapse of 2008” was portrayed as a threat to Latin American democracy.¹⁷ Other examples of when media and state directly converge include the now defunct magazine *Encounter*, an internationally influential publication that consistently supported US foreign policy dictates during the coups in Iran 1953, Guatemala in 1954 and Chile in 1971. The magazine, which folded in 1991, turned out to be a US and British intelligence asset, with the CIA directly subsidizing the editorial staff. It was one of many CIA-financed media outlets designed to advance US interests to an unsuspecting readership.¹⁸

The national media in the majority acceded to the *Miami Herald's* analysis of the Cuban Five, one example of the paper's influence on the national press when it comes to Cuba. According to Fernández, whose blog *Progreso Weekly/Progreso Seminal* examines the paper's one-sided Cuban coverage, “So much of mainstream media look to the Herald as the outlet that provides the best, most ‘expert’ coverage on Cuba. And the Herald has always been anti-Castro.” If the press was doing its job, Fernández noted, it would expose the violent background of anti-revolutionaries like Basulto, and report on the

necessity of the country to protect itself from Cuban-American terrorists, including those responsible for the bombing of Cubana Airlines in 1976 that killed 73 passengers. This unknown history of terrorism that has claimed more than 3,000 civilian deaths in Cuba remains in a deep informational black hole.¹⁹

The consistency in which coverage of Cuba has contained so many negative qualifiers, while ostensibly providing non-judgmental reporting, indicates a conscious decision on the part of journalists and editors to ensure the consumer is exposed to a distorted perspective of the subject material regardless of the facts. Or as Warren Hinkle, a columnist for the *San Francisco Examiner* (a Hearst syndicate paper), once commented: “It’s a journalist axiom that if it’s anti-Cuba, it has to be true.”²⁰

Truth has little role to play in Cuban coverage. But one example occurred when a fact-free article was rapidly turned into accepted evidence in 2015 with a report on Cuban military in Syria. Both *Fox News* and *Daily Beast* claimed hundreds of Cuban military personnel were assisting Bashar al-Assad in the country’s civil war. The report was substantial in details and expert opinion. The only thing lacking was evidence.²¹ That didn’t stop the lie from spreading across both traditional and social media, even reaching into the presidential election campaign when GOP candidate Ted Cruz echoed the claim to millions on *Meet the Press*:

There’re a couple hundred Cubans right now with a major Cuban general fighting in the Syrian civil war. You’ve got Iran. You’ve got General Suleimani in bed with the Russians. So you now got Russia, Cuba and Iran all arm in arm.²²

Cruz’s statement was shockingly revealing—and entirely untrue.

Sourcing the article revealed how the facts could be so far removed from reality. *Fox News* simply used an ideologically driven professor from the counter-revolutionary Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies at the University of Miami who wrote a page-long study based on hearsay, and one anonymous US official supposedly confirming the misinformation. As far as any journalistic investigation went, none was apparently needed in accordance with Hinkle’s dictum.

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Matt Peppe at *Common Dreams* exposed the complete lack of media integrity in his piece: “The Imaginary Cuban Troops in Syria.” Peppe revealed:

The source at the Miami Institute indicated that, an Arab military officer at the Damascus airport reportedly witnessed two Russian planes arrive there with Cuban military personnel on board. When the officer questioned the Cubans, they told him they were there to assist Assad because they are experts at operating Russian tanks. It is unclear what nationality the “Arab” officer was. Perhaps said Arab determined the people aboard the Russian plane were Cubans because he saw them smoking cigars and drinking mojitos. The Cuban soldiers then volunteered—supposedly—they were “there to assist Assad” because of their expertise manning Russian tanks. However improbable this may seem to an unbiased observer, the source from the Miami Institute said that: “it doesn’t surprise me.”²³

Peppe’s account further exposed how flimsy the story was:

And what about this anonymous “US official” who “confirmed” the report? They provide no photos, no video, no keyhole satellites, little specifics and little additional details beyond that which was fed to them in the Institute’s report. Put simply: There’s no indication that their “intelligence” was anything other than the report itself.²⁴

Neither *Fox News* nor the other outlets ever rescinded or corrected this complete fabrication. The propaganda ranked right up there with former US ambassador to the United Nations John Bolton’s spurious, baseless claim that the Cuban government was developing biological weapons,²⁵ prior to the invasion of Iraq and when the American population was still hyper-sensitive from 9/11.

There are hundreds of instances of how the press renounces basic journalistic practices when covering Cuba. When does a pattern demonstrate bias? It is most often a legal question but applicable to the topic of this work. The media has consistently published

assumptions and misinformation regarding Cuba that reveals an overwhelmingly negative viewpoint. There has been little challenge to those suppositions, and this abrogation represents the media's greatest influence. Consumers have scant opportunity to contradict the Cuban narrative as there is almost no other viewpoint provided. Media's symbiotic relationship with the consumer is built on trust, a condition taken full advantage of, to the point of abuse, by the press that apparently has no intention of altering its perceptions of Cuba—regardless of the facts.

Information published is at all times based on a decision-making process—and, in the case of covering the island nation, there is no formula other than ensuring all adverse aspects are highlighted. The default position is to give priority to news that shows the country's social/economic make-up in the most disadvantageous light. It doesn't exclude the possibility of affirmative or fair reporting on Cuba, but within those articles, no matter how innocuous the subject, are found modifiers that attempt to diminish any of the positive characteristics of the topic. Additionally, standard techniques that contain anti-revolutionary markers along with actual misinformation are consistently included. Internationally renowned author and political activist Noam Chomsky described the media's attitude toward Cuba succinctly, "you can cut the hostility with a knife."²⁶

A report on Cuba opening its first wholesale food outlet for former state-run restaurants converted to cooperatives was covered by *Fox News* in March 2018. The headline smirked: "Watch Out, Costco: First Bulk Store Opens in Communist Cuba."

Within the content of the article, a Cuban shopper was quoted, "The place is pretty, the service is good, but it's still the same price as retail. In truth, it doesn't resolve our problems," Carrazana said. "I hope this is like a seed for a wholesale market where we entrepreneurs can buy at a different price."²⁷ The reader would have no opportunity to verify the statement regarding pricing. If able to, it would be discovered it was not true.

Among the products sold by the wholesale market Mercabal are different varieties of beans, cigars, soft drinks, beers, as well as sugar, salt, jams, chicken, hamburgers and sausages, at a discounted

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price of 20 percent from the retail price as applied. Chicken is discounted by 30 percent.²⁸ Havana resident Maria Garcia confirmed the discounted pricing for wholesale merchants, who have to prove ownership of a private restaurant to purchase from the outlet. “I was there, saw the pricing and anyone who says they are the same as retail is not telling the truth.”²⁹

As the reader in the Fox article was only provided with information from a source who was either unaware of the actual pricing and structure of the new wholesale outlet, or was intentionally concealing accurate information that was not verified by the reporter, the only logical conclusion that could be reached was that the wholesale market was a waste of time and yet another example of the ineptitude of the country’s bureaucracy. The headline itself, by including the descriptive “Communist” in front of Cuba would ensure the consumer would undoubtedly internalize all the derogatory implications associated with the designation even before getting to the article. There is no label other than “Communist” that creates such deeply rooted negative connotations within the American psyche. On the same page, *Fox News* ran a story regarding Saudi Arabia, but there was no headline labeling the country as an “Islamic Fundamentalist Medieval Monarchy.”³⁰ The intent of the inclusion of a qualifier in one and the omission in the other is to lead the reader into predisposed value judgments on the subject matter. It is how the press utilizes the trust inherent in its relationship with the consumer in order to manipulate facts and create unchallengeable misrepresentations and falsehoods.

Journalist and media expert on Cuba Karen Lee Wald commented:

The media never fails to remind everyone that Cuba is supposedly still communist, and that just puts all the critical aspects of that term out there. The media doesn’t put “capitalist” in front of England on headlines about that country, but Cuba is an official enemy, so it has to be mentioned always. It’s a way to slant the news against Cuba no matter the subject.³¹

Those descriptions establish the parameters to internalize positive or negative assessments based on preconditioned stan-

dards. Saudi Arabia's new monarch Muhammad bin Salman is described as a "benevolent autocrat,"³² while Venezuelan's democratically elected president Nicolás Maduro is labeled a "dictator."³³ One is an ally of the USA, the other is not—with the media reinforcing the government's foreign policy designations.

Mainstream media has a long history of establishing who receives the dictator term and who doesn't. Egyptian leader General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who came to power in a 2013 coup, recently announced his intention to rule until 2034. A *New York Times* article commented that this would "further entrench his authoritarian rule" while recognizing he had jailed thousands of opponents and taken over the courts. The article, however, was completely absent of any description of this US ally as a dictator.³⁴

When characterizations emanate from the so-called liberal media, it has an even greater effect. As Wald stresses that while Fox's ideological perspective is easy to disseminate, it is the supposed "liberal" media such as *The New Yorker* that can create a greater negative impression on those the USA has designated anti-American, such as Cuba. The reader is more readily willing to believe the misinformation as it tends to include more aspects of the truth from a source with a reputation for balance and left-leaning sympathies, she says. "It's like walking through a field of beautiful wildflowers not knowing where the landmines are."³⁵

A textbook example occurred with Nicolas Kristof's column in the *New York Times* addressing Cuba's enviable health care program in comparison to the United States. While being overall balanced and often positive, including legitimate critique of the deficiencies in the system, Kristof couldn't resist opening the article with unrelated misrepresentations and criticism.

The first two paragraphs set the tone:

Claudia Fernández, 29, is an accountant whose stomach bulges with her first child, a girl, who is due in April.

Fernández lives in a cramped apartment on a potholed street and can't afford a car. She also gets by without a meaningful vote or the right to speak freely about politics. Yet the paradox of Cuba is this: Her baby appears more likely to survive than if she were born in the United States.³⁶