

behind, supposedly to freeze and die in empty factories and abandoned fields. (That was the popular characterization of the “Rustbelt” back in the 1970’s and 80’s.) Still others, the snowbirds, leave just for six months, heading to their condos in Arizona, Florida, Texas, and New Mexico. They claim that their old bones can’t take clearing their walks anymore, even with a snowblower. Once upon a time, a neighbor might have looked after them to make sure they weren’t buried alive, but in a self-centered society such as ours, why take any chances when you can have sun year-round?

A good chunk of my hometown of Ellsworth, Wisconsin, migrates when November comes around and doesn’t return until April. At the newspaper I work for, we have to make many address changes on subscriptions to make sure they reach the right resorts. With the state of the mail, it is a hit-or-miss proposition (often a miss), and we don’t hear the end of it. During a village board meeting, the village president joked that we should hold our December, January, and February meetings in Florida, Texas, and Arizona, since that’s where much of our constituency is. In fact, one board member was already down there, a snowbird himself, away from his duties as a village trustee for five months out of the year. I voted against him in the last election and was pleased he didn’t win.

There’s no question that America has held a prejudice against winter for the past 30 years, but that may be changing. Besides the rise of winter tourism, we have the recent success of the U.S. Winter Olympic team, which won more medals than ever before, and the romanticization of the Green Bay Packers and the “frozen tundra” they play on. Recently, I saw a photo of a Duluth man shoveling his driveway after yet another winter storm dumped a foot of snow on the city. He commented that he had moved back to Duluth from New Mexico to experience the certainty of winter along Superior’s shores once again.

This past winter, I was more annoyed than ever by the juvenile chit-chat of our local anchors and weathermen whenever a spate of Chinook winds brought us a warm spell. I get the impression that they wish the whole region, if not the whole country, had weather as boring as that in Seattle or California. They seem oblivious of the region in which they live and of what its climate should be. Nasty e-mails from snow-lovers have to serve as

reminders to the talking heads: “Upper Midwest winters—love ’em or leave ’em!”

Sean Scallon is a reporter who lives in East Ellsworth, Wisconsin.

Letter From Cuba

by Doug Bandow

A Dying Dictatorship



Avenida 21, number 3014, is a nondescript house in an Havana suburb. The paint is peeling; the walls are plain; the rooms are sparse. Inside lives Elizardo Sanchez Santa Cruz, a Cuban dissident working to free the Cuban people. The task is not easy. Despite the collapse of communism elsewhere, here “political repression has been increasing,” says Sanchez. People are routinely detained; independent journalists and human-rights activists are beaten and jailed. Tracey Eaton, the *Dallas Morning News* correspondent in Havana, observes that you “couldn’t get anyone from our world to say that human rights are flourishing.” Vicki Huddleston, until recently head of the U.S. Interests Section in Cuba, agrees: “This government is very good at intimidation.”

That intimidation has not prevented Cubans from risking their lives, freedom, and property to fight for human rights. Sanchez is known as the dean of human-rights activists and heads the Cuban Commission on Human Rights and National Reconciliation. Of medium stature and with gray, receding hair, the 59-year-old Sanchez doesn’t look like someone who would strike fear in the Cuban government. But, as Sanchez notes, while the regime took power in 1959 in a genuinely popular revolution, “the base of support of the government has been shrinking” ever since.

That would make any dictatorship nervous. Sanchez observes wryly that he has spent “only eight-and-a-half years in prison”; colleagues have been jailed for as many as 30 years. His crimes include criticizing Castro in private conversation, speaking of jails loaded with political prisoners, and attacking the regime’s purge of popular military figures. The latter generated a charge of “disseminating

false news against international peace.” The Castro regime’s policy is simple, Sanchez explains: It violates “all political, economic, and civil rights.” Because of the vagaries of the regime, however, “repression in Cuba has oscillated, sometimes increasing, sometimes decreasing.” The level of repression depends, in large part, on the degree to which people express discontent. More popular opposition yields more repression—as when students stormed the Mexican embassy in spring 2002 in hopes of gaining exit visas. The physical force employed against them by the government was “pretty startling,” says Huddleston. Thus, today, says Sanchez, “political repression is bigger in a horizontal sense,” with “more political repression against all of the population.” Huddleston voices similar concerns: “For me, the most worrisome thing is that the situation will be shoved backwards.”

Moreover, for those imprisoned, the circumstances are probably worse now than they were in the past. Explains Sanchez, “When I was in jail, conditions were very bad.” Now, however, “former political prisoners say that prisons seemed to be hotels compared to what they are now.” There is some good news mixed among the bad. During the 1990’s, there were some 1,000 political prisoners. Today, Sanchez notes, there are “only” 220, but that is still the highest in the Western hemisphere and “one of the highest in the world in relative terms.”

While it was once “very dangerous” for human-rights activists to meet with the foreign press, Sanchez now does so without obvious retaliation. The regime, he claims, “would like us to be dead, but they know that the political cost would be too high.”

Moreover, “we are not an immediate threat to the government.” So it “has understood that it doesn’t need to have so many political prisoners to maintain control.” Huddleston concurs: “As the government has consolidated power, it has less need to execute and imprison” opponents.

There has been some improvement in religious freedom, especially since the Pope’s visit in 1998. The government does not interfere in the internal affairs of the Church, but, explained Huddleston, “in every town a religious commission decides whether the Church can provide social services, hold marches, and conduct other activities.” Moreover, while Catholic and Protestant churches are flourishing, expectations generated by

the Pope's visit, such as gaining the right to create church schools, have been disappointed.

Sanchez started his political life as a 16-year-old student activist and member of the socialist youth organization. But he soon became disillusioned: "It became very clear that it had become a totalitarian government." He was expelled from the university and saw his journalist friends fired for criticizing the regime in private conversations.

Despite all that he has gone through, he remains hopeful. "Change will happen in the short or medium term." The "transition could start this very night." True, he notes, Havana's "repression is getting harsher. And the government is not thinking of democratic reforms." But Fidel Castro is the glue holding together a failed system. When the 75-year-old Castro leaves the scene, Sanchez believes, there will be a "power vacuum. And what happens next will be uncontrollable." In Sanchez's view, when the *caudillos*, or strong men, "are not on the scene, their ideologies also end."

Some observers think Cuba may already have entered its transition, which gives the nascent opposition an opportunity to lead. Even now there is popular ferment. "These human-rights activists and independent journalists, doctors, and economists are beginning to mean something," explains Huddleston. They are giving "voice to this enormous frustration of the Cuban people."

For instance, Project Varela, which is named after an 18th-century priest, collected more than 10,000 signatures; under Cuba's constitution, that is enough to require that a plebiscite be held. The movement reflects a generally Christian social-democratic perspective, pushing for free elections, trade unions, and economic liberty. The government attempted to prevent people from coming to Havana and tried to intimidate people into removing their names from the petition. Project Varela is "shaping up as an interesting challenge to the government," says Huddleston. In response, Fidel Castro promoted, through the state's wide panoply of coercive tools, a constitutional amendment to enshrine socialism. Cuban officials dismiss the dissidents as unrepresentative, tools of America, and much more, none of it positive. Some apparatchiks have a hard time even imagining dissent. Ismael Gonzalez, vice minister of culture, notes that "art is, by its nature, belligerent." But only "theoretically speak-

ing," in his view, might that belligerence be expressed as criticism of the government. Naturally, the government limits anything that might "jeopardize the stability or cultural life of the country." He cheerily adds: "Fortunately, we haven't seen that reality in many years."

Cuban officials also contend that they reflect popular sentiment in their own way—consulting with farmers and other groups, for instance. Roberto Alarcon, head of the National Assembly, grandly declares: "I don't think that the Cuban system is less democratic than yours." Of course, he never faces election, and, as the number-three man in the hierarchy, he can be dismissed by Fidel alone.

Equally laughable are the regime's pretensions to economic equality. Today, there are two categories of Cubans: those with dollars and those without.

Cuba flaunts its independence from America, but the greenback rules. The pesos paid by the government to an electrical engineer buy little even when the goods are available; the dollars he earns driving a pedicab ensure that his family has enough to eat.

Indeed, the one certainty in Havana is that any Westerner will be swarmed by Cubans desperate for dollars: "Are you looking for a nice restaurant?" "Where are you from?" "My friend, would you like some cigars?" It wasn't supposed to be this way. Cuba's revolution is more than 40 years old. At least the repressive regime of Fulgencio Batista offered rapid economic growth along with obvious injustice. Fidel Castro has combined persistent poverty with rampant injustice.

Havana blames the U.S. trade embargo for its problems. But Sanchez claims the case is otherwise. He explains that "the government in Cuba owns everything. It owns all the economic enterprises, all the media, the telecommunications system, the banks, and foreign trade."

Thus, the nation's economic problems are the result not of the embargo but of "the impact of totalitarian measures" by a regime that is "repressive and inefficient." Brutal collectivism has frozen this entrepreneurial people in the 1950's.

For his first three decades in power, Castro was able to disguise the impact of his bankrupt policies with abundant Soviet subsidies. The Soviet Union's collapse ended Cuba's free ride. Alfredo Gonzalez Gutierrez, advisor to the minister of economy and planning, calls the succeeding years "the special period." To cope with the deep slide, Havana lib-

eralized its economy a bit, encouraging a modicum of private domestic activity. Cuba also attracted \$1.7 billion in foreign investment over the last decade. Nearly two million foreign tourists last year contributed about two billion dollars, supplemented by \$800 million in family remittances from expatriate Cubans, mostly in America. Nevertheless, Cuba seems to be treading water, frozen in time. Almost every building suffers from falling plaster and peeling paint; the odd renovation stands out. Potholes abound; driving on any but a main street involves an obstacle course. Pedestrians need to keep their eyes on the ground; a jogger risks life and limb on the uneven streets.

Even more striking are the cars. A third or so are American, mostly from the 1950's and held together with baling wire and duct tape. An equal number of vehicles are Soviet, particularly the small, box-like Lada.

But there is a smattering of modern and even luxury cars—Audis and Mercedes, for instance. These go to foreigners, particularly employees of joint ventures, and well-connected Cubans. They suggest the glimmer of a very different future, should communism in Cuba go the way of that in Russia. Many Cubans wait eagerly. Mike and Alejandro, a 22-year-old dance instructor and a 21-year-old construction worker, respectively, approach two of us as we wander Havana's back streets. They are mulattoes, common in Cuba but still tending to reside at the bottom of the socioeconomic system. Friendly and outgoing, they move easily among crowded streets, decrepit buildings, and cramped homes.

Mike lives with his family in a small apartment, one of a half-dozen down a narrow alcove off a side street. Alejandro's family of six lives in a cramped two-bedroom walk-up. The family's furniture consists of two worn beds, a small sofa, and a couple of chairs. Chicken feet fill the Soviet refrigerator; a large metal pot acts as a bathtub.

Each family gets a 3" by 1 1/2" bar of soap, a box of laundry detergent, and a bottle of cooking oil each month. Each person also is entitled to a kilo of beans, two kilos of rice, a smattering of meat, and three eggs a month—if they are available. Mike's family shops at a small corner *bordega* that looks like a shop out of the 19th century, with a concrete floor, wooden counter, chalkboard, and small metal scale.

Rice and beans sit in big sacks on the

floor behind the counter; the shelves are largely empty, hosting only three bottles of milk, one jar of cooking oil, and a few other products. The chalkboard lists the goods theoretically available, along with the price of those actually in stock. Only children seven and under get milk, and then not every day. Down the street, people line up to buy one piece of bread a day, cooked in an ancient bakery with a concrete floor, a large iron bin for the dough, and an open-fire oven.

There's no path for upward mobility. For most Cubans, their only chance is to search for foreigners with dollars, guide them around the city, and then hit them up for a few bucks—to supplement incomes which average the equivalent of ten dollars per month.

Some Cubans have found a way to make the system work, however. Just three blocks from the primitive *bordega* where Mike's and Alejandro's families bring their ration books sits a large supermarket, its shelves full of soda, mineral water, soap, and food. All prices are in dollars. Dollar stores abound throughout the city. A majority of Cubans get enough dollars to buy some milk for their families or a bit of extra rice when the ration runs out—or, occasionally, to indulge their children

in sweets.

Then there is Carlos, who explains that he "represents Spanish capital." He lives in a two-story house in a nice Havana suburb. The living room is filled with modern furniture and sports a huge TV; a fine oil painting hangs on the wall, and a large porcelain statue graces the entry. The bathroom tile would look elegant in any American home. A pool and generator supplement a house surrounded by a security fence and guarded by two Dobermans and a German Shepherd. A Mercedes sits in the driveway. Carlos hosts a lunch for the foreign visitors; we start with drinks and salad. Then we feast on sausages, barbecued on his grill. The next course is massive pork chops. The meal is capped by bowels of lobster tails.

I ask Roberto Alarcon about this striking contradiction to the revolution. Lazily lounging in a finely tailored suit and fondling an unlit cigar, Alarcon responds that the situation is fairer than a decade ago, when it was illegal for anyone to hold dollars—though some did so anyway. "Technically speaking, you don't now have a legal border. You have an economic border." That is precisely the problem. The fact that an estimated 60 percent of people have some access to

dollars means that more people are able to improve their living standards. Paradoxically, however, that makes the inequality even starker. The revolution is a mockery for those who have no dollars.

It is bad enough to create an impoverished tyranny in order to ensure equality. But to create an impoverished tyranny and then deliver inequality?

The final defense of the elite that runs Cuba is the country's social-service system, particularly in education and health. Yet this system serves a political purpose. Although the government has devoted much of its limited resources to education and health care, such programs, observes Sanchez, "form part of the official propaganda system."

Moreover, virtually nothing works. For instance, according to Mike and Alejandro, the official food rations can only be stretched to last three weeks. Mike says simply: "My family is hungry."

Even professionals within the system, who defend the socialist ideal, acknowledge the practical shortcomings of their vaunted social system: inadequate resources, malfunctioning equipment, and nonexistent supplies. For all of the chatter about high-quality health care, the only way to get many pharmaceuticals is

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to buy them with dollars. Poverty, whether equally shared or not, is no one's friend.

Sanchez and others like him plan to struggle on. Many dissidents "leave the country," he observes; indeed, "the government would prefer that many Cubans leave." However, as Margaret Thatcher once said, "When people want to leave the country, it is the government that should leave." He adds: "This is my country. The solution is not that the Cubans should just leave their country. I think we should stay here and change things."

Sanchez looks overseas for support, because international pressure keeps him and many of his colleagues out of jail. As in the former Soviet bloc, the foreign media "help protect the dissidents."

He also suggests that America lift its embargo against Cuba, which includes a travel ban, with limited exceptions (for journalists, for example). "I think the best policy would be for friendly relations to exist between both our countries."

Indeed, Sanchez argues, "It is clear that the Cuban government really doesn't want the embargo to be lifted," despite its public protestations to the contrary. Even some U.S. officials privately concur. Castro probably feels secure enough to allow more tourists but not to tolerate full, open economic relations. Sanchez's argument is simple: "The sanction policy by the U.S. government has allowed the Cuban government to have a good alibi to justify the failure of the totalitarian model in Cuba." Because the problems "are self-inflicted," he notes, "it is very good [for Havana] to have this sort of war with the U.S. government."

Moreover, contact with foreigners is likely to breed discontent. "This type of government tries to hide the reality of the country" from its citizens, he notes. "The more information that you give to the public about the reality, the better for us and the rest of the Cuban people."

In his view, "it is absurd that there is a prohibition on Americans traveling to Cuba." The only plausible argument for the present policy, observes Sanchez, is the fact that dollars spent in Cuba "will be used for repression."

Yet thousands of Cuban-Americans, who zealously support the embargo, travel to Cuba every year. Cuban-Americans also send \$800 million in remittances to relatives in the island nation. By their own actions, they are subsidizing Castro's regime.

Maintaining the 41-year-old embargo—indeed, strengthening it, as in 1992

and 1996—is merely reinforcing failure. This argument is gaining ground on Capitol Hill, winning over even the likes of House Majority Leader Richard Arney (R-TX). The potential economic benefit to American industry is obvious. More important, however, is the subversive potential of American visitors and dollars.

Whether the embargo stays or goes, Cuba's future will be determined by men and women like Sanchez. Americans can hope for reform in Cuba, but, as Vicki Huddleston emphatically argues, "Decisions for Cubans have to be made by Cubans. They are putting their lives on the line."

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Letter From Venice

by Andrei Navrozov

Strange Customs



I had sworn I would not buy any carpets, and, in the end, I did keep that promise, but then one scorching hot day my friends finally came to pry me loose of the snug little corner of the hotel bar. Before I knew it, I was in the market, buying a preternaturally heavy wrought-iron table with four matching chairs for the balcony and arranging the transport of these precious curiosities home to Venice. It isn't really true that I'm a compulsive loungeur, by the way, an Oblomov type who has lived in the West long enough to learn how to cover his tracks by posing as a writer; at times, I'm capable of great displays of energy, as everybody realized on one particular occasion during that stay in Morocco when, in a restaurant less authentically Levantine than many a British bank, I collared a passing waiter and persuaded him to sweet-talk his mother into asking us to lunch on the following day.

The meal was served belowground inside a mud edifice that, bunched up like a grape against a cluster of identical dwellings, belonged to a Berber village 150 kilometers—three-and-a-half hours of faulty suspension and tourist suspense, relieved only intermittently in the el-

lipses of police checkpoints—from the king's palace, which, as even university students and other republican scum would agree, is a charming way of referring to downtown Marrakesh. There were flies in the room. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that there was a room in the flies, because whenever one took wing, it exposed a fly-sized grayness of the whitewash beneath, like a child's puzzle with a piece missing. *Oh, to revert to type*, I whispered as in prayer. Why couldn't I have stayed Oblomov and never bothered to change out of my old dressing gown?

But then the food, which I had convinced myself I would not be able to countenance despite the enormity of the embarrassment that would surely engulf all concerned, began to arrive. First came the honey, wild honey with freshly baked bread, and I can only say that, speaking objectively, it tasted the way Heaven is supposed to taste upon the lips of a devout Muslim. Speaking subjectively, it was like nothing I had ever tasted, and by the end of the afternoon, after all the honey and the roast goat and the mint tea and the fresh almonds, I was ready to start on the flies; how delightful they were, I thought, how frisky yet not without a certain gravitas, and besides, did not our own Scripture ridicule those who would strain at a gnat? All of which was a way of congratulating myself for my ingenuity, my daring, my energy, and for having broken for good with those lethargic ways which some people have been led to believe are second nature to a Russian writer *manqué*.

I then returned to Venice, having forgotten all about my spurious acquisition in the *souk* until months later, when a letter headlined *Dogana di Venezia* arrived in the post. Now, you understand that encounters with bureaucracy, of which a customs officer anywhere in the world is a classic exponent, are fraught with consequence under the best of circumstances; that, here in Italy, bureaucracy is renowned as a gross caricature on the concept of byzantine; and that Venice, being a city on water, and, by tradition, the most byzantine in Italy, makes finding your way through the official maze as near a logistic impossibility as a native can imagine. Nonetheless, my old friend and new landlord, Hugues L—, volunteered to come along, and, a few days thereafter, the pair of us were well and truly lost in the low underbrush of alder and willow that encircles Marco Polo