

KIT KAT CLUB
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And Then There Was One
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The Iron Curtain collapsed. China introduced capitalism. Vietnam opened to limited free enterprise. North Korea began negotiations with South Korea. The communist empire disintegrated.

And then there was one. Cuba.

Fidel Castro came to power on January 1, 1959 and that spring he declared himself Prime Minister. The new government passed an agrarian reform act which limited private ownership and also confiscated foreign-owned industries. Farms, plantations, oil refineries, and communications systems were nationalized, racial discrimination was outlawed, a low-income housing program was created, free health care and education were made available to all.

In 1966, Cuba's communist party was established and thus began decades of political repression. Religious affiliation was deemed anti-revolutionary, prostitutes were sent to vocational schools for rehabilitation and homosexuals were imprisoned in labor camps.

Committees for the Defense of the Revolution were formed. These neighborhood groups performed good deeds including organizing important health and education programs, but they also served as monitors of accepted behavior.

The 1970's were heady times for Cuba with the infusion of billions of dollars of aid from the Soviet Union. The gains of the revolution were indisputable, especially for a third world country.

The health care system eliminated infectious diseases and drastically lowered the infant mortality rate. The number of doctors increased from 6,000 to over 25,000 and illiteracy and unemployment were nearly eradicated. Today there are 66,000 doctors, many of whom are working as taxi drivers in order to get paid in dollars.

Cuba's new constitution was approved in 1976 and Fidel Castro's position as Head of State became constitutional. As the decade of the '80's began, Cuba was still a Latin American symbol of independence from the U.S., but the quality of life was beginning to decline. Productivity fell, health care, education and social services were deteriorating, and 125,000 Cubans fled to the U.S. in the Mariel boat-lift. By the late 1980's Cuba was billions of dollars in debt to the Soviet Union and food rationing was instituted.

When the Soviet Union came apart in 1991, Cuba was effected immediately. On an annual basis they lost billions of dollars in economic aid, including 54% of their food, \$1 billion in military assistance, and 90% of their oil. It was equivalent to our depression and the country was paralyzed. The government dubbed this the "Special Period." The slogan of the 1960's, "Fatherland or Death," was modified to "Socialism or Death" and "100% Cubano" became the motto.

Energy consumption was drastically reduced, brown outs were common, oxen replaced tractors, food rations were cut to survival level, and a million Chinese bicycles were imported. Fidel said, "Expanding the use of the bicycle is an indicator of cultural advancement."

Over the next few years Castro made compromises that, in the past, would have been non-negotiable. He eased travel restrictions, permitted farmers to sell a portion of their produce on the open market, offered licenses for small private businesses in return for a percentage of the profits, developed joint ventures with other countries and, in 1993, legalized the American dollar. This had a major impact on the concept of egalitarianism. The haves had dollars, the have nots didn't. The U.S. congress passed the Helms Burton Act which tightened restrictions on trade, the Pope paid a visit, and Elian Gonzalez arrived in the United States.

In April, 2000 I visited Cuba as part of a People-to-People Program through the U.S. State Department sponsored by The Columbus Council on World Affairs. We took with us donated medical supplies for hospitals, along with books, games, and recreational equipment for children. We visited government officials, the President of the Cuban Supreme Court, hospitals, elementary schools, the University of Havana, the U.S. Interest Section (a.k.a.Embassy), farms, homes, biked through Havana and talked with "ordinary" Cubans. It was a fascinating experience.

The sign at the Havana airport read "Welcome to Cuba" but the reception was less than cordial. When my bag went through the x-ray machine the guard asked to see my cell phone. When he was certain it wasn't connected to Cubatel he let me pass. I took a picture of a poster of Elian Gonzalez. Another guard said, "No pictures in the airport." Indeed, "Welcome to Cuba."

Cuba thrills the senses. It is a magical place full of music, baseball, ballet, warm and expressive people, and hand-rolled cigars.

On the flip side are frustrated youth, a communist system that has failed the populace, political repression, anti-American demonstrations, crumbling buildings, empty stores, police on every corner, and a stubborn old dictator. It is an island frozen in time.

Cuba is the planet's automotive Jurassic park with 50,000 classic 1950's U.S. automobiles lumbering through its pot-holed streets spewing smoke. They are joined by mechanically challenged Russian Ladas, pedicabs, motorcycles with sidecars, oxen-drawn carts, Chinese bicycles, and overcrowded buses.

Most of Havana was built between 1900 and 1958 and was an architectural treasure. After the revolution in 1959 all homes and land became property of the state. With the disappearance of land speculation there was no incentive for development. Large, single-family homes were taken from the wealthy and converted to housing for up to 30 families. Later, over 100 families moved in. Most homes have not been updated since 1959. Eighty buildings fall down in Havana every year and the estimated costs for rebuilding Old Havana alone is \$30 billion.

During our visits with government officials I tried to capture the essence of our meetings "in their own words."

The Institute for Friendship with People (ICAP) is a non-governmental organization which, admittedly, espouses the party line. The goal: to lift the "blockade" (which we call the Embargo.)

Quotes from the Director: "We are in a 40-year boxing match. We are the super lightweight and the U.S. is the super heavy weight. You can hit hard but we can move faster. Everything is difficult but not impossible. I was nine years old when the Revolution began so I grew up with equality. Some Cubans want us to be another star in your flag. Most Cubans want independence. If you judge us by our affluence, you win – if you judge us by peace and stability, we are equal. We have to adapt Cuba to the New World. The solution is to eliminate the dollar, strengthen the peso, and have one currency with a strong economy. Our main resource is the capacity of the Cuban people, their intellect, and their will. Our goal is a clean society. There is very little abuse of women because it is not considered manly. Of course rapists and drug dealers get the death penalty. We are building a justice society, not a communist or socialist society. Cubans are not into win/lose conversations."

We asked "What happens after Castro?" He responded "People will appear as leaders."

We next visited the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The Director spoke with passion:

"Forty-one years ago we learned to touch our identity. The U.S. says that people are fleeing Cuba because of oppression. Actually it is like any other third world country – they see the U.S. as the land of golden opportunity. The Cuban government does not stop people from immigrating. They must have a visa from the U.S. and 20,000 visas a year is not enough. If a normal person tries to leave by boat or raft and is sent back, there are no penalties. We are defending our right to be ourselves. In a pluralistic world there should be room for many systems. We suffer sabotage, terrorism, bombs from Cubans in Florida. We don't bomb you! We want to work in peace. Normalization will occur sometime in the future. Change will come when the U.S. government is no longer held hostage by the Miami Cubans."

We were beginning to feel comfortable and then he added:

"We have evidence of biological warfare against Cuba. Planes flying over our fields spraying our crops causing Dengue Fever and killing our children."

We process this information.

The next stop was the Supreme Court. The slogan on top of the building read – "Homeland or Death: We will win." (I thought of Patrick Henry and "Give me liberty or give me death.)

The President of the Supreme Court has been in office for one year. He was elected by the National Assembly, and, at 45 years of age, is young for the position. A graduate of the University of Havana Law School, he is one of the first black Cubans to hold a high ranking position. He was very bright, very charming, and as reported by the women, "very Latin."

He spoke through an interpreter but we suspected he is fluent in English. He went into detail describing the differences between the Cuban and U.S. judicial systems, noting that their system is separate from the government. He described the three levels of the courts (municipal, provincial and supreme).

When he paused we asked about capital punishment.

He replied: "The death sentence has been used less since 1959. However, the hostility of the U.S. government towards Cuba contributes to us maintaining our capital punishment." We process this information.

We asked, "How many cases does the Supreme Court hear every year?" He responded "Several dozen thousand." The Cuban way – numbers don't mean much.

What is the most difficult case you have heard? "The one that is pending."
What is the most difficult case you anticipate? "The next after the current one."
Later we agreed that he has potential as a politician.

We moved on to a maternity and pediatric hospital.

The doctor's parking lot was filled with bicycles while the government functionaries were driving late-model automobiles.

To a person, the health care personnel with whom we met were dedicated professionals. We took with us \$10,000 in donated medical supplies. It was Christmas in April. In Cuba there is one doctor for every 120 families. Fifty percent of the doctors are women and health care centers around the family doctor. At the 2nd tier are hospitals and local clinics. The 3rd level includes larger hospitals and research institutions. The greatest challenges are medical supplies, facilities, elevators, sewage systems and a shortage of nurses.

The average family has 1.5 children. Abortion is legal and free. The IUD and tubal ligation are the most popular forms of birth control. No vasectomies for the men. Latin machismo is alive and well in Cuba.

The first AIDS cases in Cuba were discovered in 1987. In the early years everyone on the island was tested yearly. Now only prostitutes, homosexuals and mothers are tested. Cuba has the lowest AIDS rate in the world and sanitariums are set aside for AIDS patients who are quarantined (a euphemism for imprisoned).

What of the educational system?

We visited elementary schools and met smiling students and stern teachers. I went to reference sources to learn about the curriculum.

Control by the Communist party begins in elementary school with the "Cumulative School file." It's like a report card, but isn't limited to academic achievements. It measures "revolutionary integration" of the student and the family and documents whether the child and family participate in "voluntary" mass demonstrations, or whether they belong to a church or religious group. The

file accompanies the child for life, and is continually updated. University options will depend on what is in the file. If the student doesn't profess a truly Marxist life, many career possibilities will be denied.

Beginning in elementary school the student hears that God doesn't exist and that religion is "the opium of the masses." If any student speaks of God, the parents are called to the school and warned that they are "confusing" the child. The Code for Children, Youth and Family provides for a three-year prison sentence for any parent who teaches a child ideas contrary to communism. The code is very clear: "No Cuban parent has the right to 'deform' the ideology of their children. The state is the true 'father'."

On three occasions I had appointments with representatives of the University of Havana. Each time they broke the appointments or were no shows, so a group of us visited on our own and talked with students. They were bright and articulate, but not very curious.

They told us the University of Havana was founded in 1798, and that it takes five years to earn a BA or Law degree and six years to earn an MD. There are no tuition or room and board charges, books are free and all students receive miniscule stipends.

They said they have access to email but not to the internet which is blocked by the government. Later a faculty member said his students use the Internet everyday in class. Who to believe? There was a tank on campus which was captured in 1958 as a symbol of students fighting against dictators.

I asked "How many medical students are enrolled?" They responded "Mucho." (Again, the Cuban way with numbers).

The buildings were in need of major repairs. There was no visible technology in classrooms and chairs and chalk boards were broken.

As Cuba becomes more open, the challenge for faculty will be to educate students about a world that is global and capitalist while their country is socialist and isolated. Some faculty stretch the limits now but they are quick to point out that they are not criticizing the revolution or President Castro. They are merely teaching their students to think and that makes them (the faculty) good revolutionaries. A distinctively Cuban comment which says "I am a good citizen."

In all of our visits to Cuban government agencies we were never searched, our bags were never checked, there were no guards and we were free to take pictures. Not so when we visited the U.S. Interest Section where the Marines were in charge of security. We were scanned, our bags were x-rayed, and our passports and cameras were collected at the door.

We met with Ambassador Vicki Huddleston. She said: "The U.S. policy towards Cuba remains the same: We want them to (1) Improve human rights, (2) Promote democracy with open economic and communication systems, (3) Reduce terrorism and improve the environment – all to lead to a pluralistic democratic nation." She added "We are not enemies of the Cuban people."

We asked what would happen if the embargo was lifted? She responded, "Castro would be seen as winning. The government would make more money. The way it works is that joint venture

companies from other countries hire workers through government agencies which take the dollar salaries and then pay the workers in pesos plus a tip on a monthly basis or a bag of goods."

She added: "Since 1992, the Cuban American people have sent over \$3 billion in aid to Cuban citizens, more than all other nations combined."

Those are the official responses but I was also interested in learning of life for the ordinary citizen. In short, it is difficult. While all Cubans are guaranteed housing, it is overcrowded with running water only a few hours a day. The minimum monthly salary is 108 pesos and the highest is 400. That translates to \$10 to \$40 per month. Doctors earn \$30 per month, a farm worker earns \$40-\$45 per month and can sell excess food (except sugar) on the open market. Eighty percent of food goes to the state for the ration system.

Monthly rations for a family include: 5 pounds of rice, 2 pounds of sugar, 2 pounds of flour, 3 pounds of beans, 7 eggs, one chicken, ½ pound of coffee, milk for children up to the age of seven, one bar of soap, two rolls of toilet paper, and 3 packs of cigarettes. Periodically they receive a pound of fish and cooking oil. Ration stores are nearly empty all of the time, peso stores are somewhat better stocked and dollar stores are jammed to capacity.

With the legalization of the dollar in 1993, some Cubans have become capitalists. An engineer turned pedicab driver increased his wages from \$30 per month to \$400. It's the same for those with small restaurants in their homes, cab drivers, and artists who sell their wares at open air markets. Our 28-year old tour guide makes \$400 to \$600 per month in non-declared tips and supports an extended family. These are the exceptions, not the rule. Still, Cuba compares favorably to the abject poverty of some Central American countries. Cubans live frugally and get by one day at a time.

Even with these challenging conditions, there is Cuban humor:
The U.S. has Yuppies, Cuba has Yuckies: Young urban Cuban communists

Socialism has only two fundamental problems – lunch and dinner.

Cubans have four rights. Education, health care, housing and stealing from the state.

Socialism or death! – What's the difference?

Everything is prohibited and what's not prohibited is illegal.

We pretend to work and the Government pretends to pay us.

There are very few open dissidents in Cuba. Those who are open recognize that there is a line they cannot cross in criticizing the government. General complaining is acceptable to a point, but specific questioning of the Communist Party's accomplishments and proposing economic and political liberalization is not acceptable and often results in prison terms.

Dissidents are not killed in the streets and do not disappear without a trace. Rather, they are isolated; thrown out of work or kept in humiliating jobs. There is no democracy wall and no

underground press. Without government approval no Cuban is permitted to have a cell phone, a direct-dial overseas line, access to a photocopying machine or an internet connection.

In Cuba everyone watches everyone beginning with the neighborhood CDR (the Committee for the Defense of the Revolution). Neighbors are expected to inform on neighbors. As a result, risk avoidance is a highly developed science. Given the choice of leaving the country or staying to "keep on keeping on" most dissidents leave.

And, there are two ways to leave Cuba - one illegal and one legal. Under the 1966 Cuban Adjustment Act, Cubans who reach U.S. soil have the right to refuge, and one year and one day after stepping onto U.S. soil they are eligible for citizenship. Since 1994, Cubans who are picked up at sea have been sent back unless they can prove fear of persecution. Along with this change came a new immigration accord whereby an annual lottery provides 20,000 visas a year for Cubans to enter the United States. Each year five hundred thousand Cubans apply for a chance for those visas, for a chance to leave the People's Paradise.

What about Castro? We asked ordinary citizens. Where does he live? "Around." Is he married? "Maybe." Does he have a family? "Probably." We asked why there are no statues of Castro, no billboards with his picture, no images on coins and bills, no t-shirts or mugs with his picture - nothing. "Fidel says you can decide how to memorialize me after I am gone."

What happens after Fidel?

"His brother Raul will succeed him and the Council of State will choose a permanent successor. There are many young people around him."

One of the most discussed topics today is whether or not to lift the embargo or, as the Cubans call it, the blockade.

The Elian Gonzalez case and the passionate actions of the Miami Cuban-American community contributed to major changes in the American public's attitude towards Cuba and, with that, have come new initiatives to lift the embargo. Those who oppose change say that lifting the embargo and travel ban will:

1. Guarantee the continuation of the current totalitarian structure,
2. Strengthen state enterprises since money will continue to flow into businesses owned by the Cuban government,
3. Perpetuate the control that the military holds over the economy, and
4. Foster the further development of Mafia-type groups.

Those who favor change say the embargo has been ineffective at toppling Castro, while effective at excluding U.S. businesses from a market dominated by European and Canadian companies. Now that the U.S. has agreed to normal relations with China, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce is making eliminating the Cuban embargo a top priority. Proponents of change say that building business ties as a foundation for building democracy is the approach the United States has followed historically in its foreign relations. They are quick to cite developments with Vietnam and China as examples of using trade as a tool to make allies of adversaries.

What of Castro's position? Publicly he states that the embargo must be lifted completely. Some Cuba watchers, however, have long argued that Castro does, in fact, not want the American trade embargo lifted, preferring to have a convenient bogeyman. A lifting of the embargo would create new threats to his political control. An influx of American tourists, our culture and our dollars would further strain the "Revolutionary values" of Cuba's young people. Cuban policymakers have to be questioning if it is possible for the Communist Party to have closer economic ties with the U.S. without loosening its hold on Cuban political life. When does an economic opportunity become a threat to absolute political control? Closer economic ties with the United States may force the government to tone down the anti-American rhetoric it has used as a force of national cohesion.

In recent years, each time the Cuban government has relaxed economic sanctions, it has later imposed restrictions, whether with foreign ownership of real estate, private businesses or in farming. If Cubans earn too much money or flaunt their wealth, they are chastised as profiteers.

Whatever the future for Cuba, true capitalism like true socialism would probably be chaos. For ten years Cubans have been watching changes in Russia and don't want to be decimated by Mafiosos and ex Communist functionaries. Ideally, I think they will want to preserve some of the merits such as free health care, free education, social security and a society largely free of crime. They will possibly seek a middle ground between socialism and capitalism, but that will be a challenge because capitalism is generally inevitable once in the door. And, in the minds of true Socialists, capitalism creates winners and losers.

What is the future of Cuba?

Perhaps the answer lies with Cuban humor.

Ask a young person "What do you want to be when you grow up?" The response: "A tourist."

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