

SYMPATHY IS NOT A FOREIGN POLICY

The moral case for US intervention in Cuba — military, economic, and diplomatic. After 127 years of half-measures and political cowardice, the argument is overdue.

By Donato Poveda · March 2026

On February 27, 2026, Donald Trump walked out of the White House toward Marine One, stopped at the press scrum, and said something no American president had said in sixty years. The Cuban government, he announced, was talking to the United States "at a very high level." And then, almost casually: "Maybe we'll have a friendly takeover of Cuba." He said it twice. Then he boarded the helicopter.

The room that erupted was not a press briefing room. It was history itself. Because that sentence represented the first time since John F. Kennedy stood at the Orange Bowl in December 1962 and made a promise he never kept that an American president had spoken plainly about what the United States actually owes Cuba, and what Cuba actually needs.

What Cuba needs is not our sympathy. It has had our sympathy for sixty years. It needs our intervention — military, economic, and diplomatic, sustained and unapologetic, with a defined objective and the will to see it through. The argument for that intervention is not new. It is 127 years old. What has always been missing is not the argument. It is the courage to make it.

1898 — THE ORIGINAL SIN

The story of American responsibility for Cuba does not begin with Castro. It begins in 1898, when the United States went to war with Spain, drove colonial power off the island, and then declined to simply leave. What followed was not liberation in the full sense of the word. It was the replacement of one form of external control with another, more paternalistic one.

The Platt Amendment of 1901 made this explicit in the most consequential way possible: it was written directly into Cuba's own constitution. The United States reserved the right to intervene in Cuban affairs to preserve Cuban independence and maintain a government adequate for protecting life, property, and individual liberty.

The Platt Amendment was formally abrogated in 1934 — but the moral logic it expressed was never repealed. You do not establish legal sovereignty over another nation's constitution and then walk away from the consequences of what that nation becomes. The obligation America created in 1898 did not expire. It was simply ignored, decade after decade, until ignoring it became its own tradition.

1959 — THE SNUB THAT CHANGED HISTORY

In April 1959, Fidel Castro — thirty-one years old, beard and fatigues, riding the international attention of a successful revolution — flew to Washington. He was not a confirmed communist. He was not yet aligned with the Soviets. He was, by most assessments, a Cuban nationalist with a messy ideology and enormous popular appeal, who had not yet decided which direction to fall.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower was in Augusta, Georgia, playing golf. He was there for all five days Castro was in Washington. The deliberate snub registered as American condescension, and Castro took it personally. He was thirty-one years old. He had just overthrown a dictatorship. And the most powerful nation on earth could not be bothered to cancel a tee time.

Vice President Richard Nixon got the meeting instead. What was listed as a 15-minute courtesy call stretched to nearly three hours. In a memorandum to Secretary of State Dulles dated April 25, 1959, Nixon wrote of Castro:

"He is either incredibly naive about Communism or under Communist discipline."

— Vice President Richard Nixon, memorandum to Secretary of State Dulles, April 25, 1959

Nixon saw it. He said it. He documented it in State Department archives. And the United States did nothing decisive about it. This is the original template for sixty years of American policy toward Cuba: accurate intelligence, clear analysis, and then — nothing.

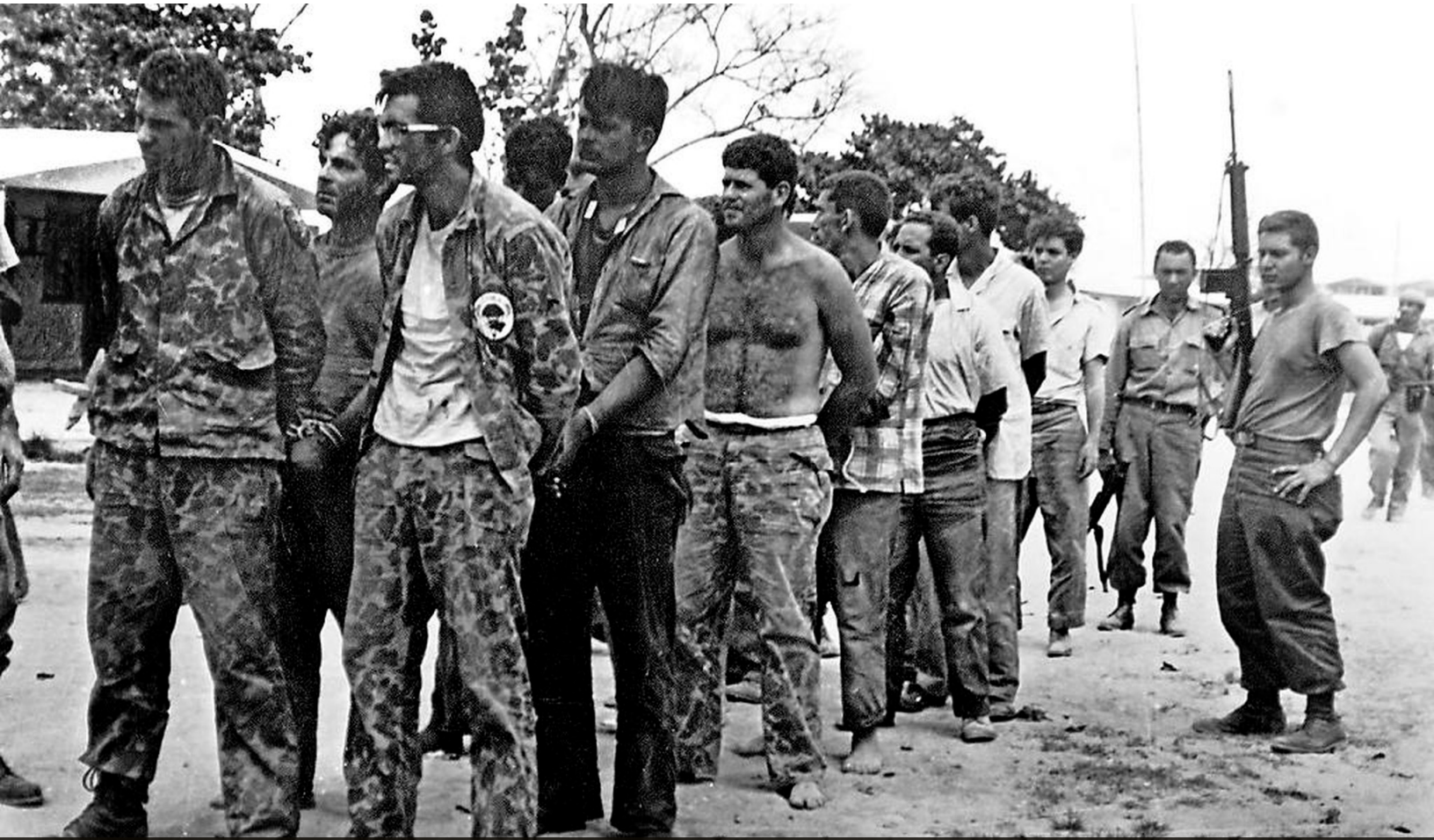
Cuba was never seen as a moral obligation; it was seen as a political liability. So every president from Eisenhower forward ran the same spreadsheet, reached the same conclusion — Cuba wasn't worth the career cost — and passed the problem to the next administration wearing the costume of principled restraint. What looked like foreign policy was actually political self-preservation, compounding for six decades.

1961 — BAY OF PIGS: AMERICA BLINKED

The Bay of Pigs invasion is remembered as a failure of American planning. What it actually was is a failure of American nerve — and the distinction matters enormously. The lesson was not that intervention in Cuba cannot work. The lesson was that half-hearted intervention, sabotaged at the moment of decision, is catastrophically worse than either full commitment or no action at all.

Kennedy's advisors changed the landing site from Trinidad — with defensible terrain and nearby guerrillas — to the Bay of Pigs: a remote, uninhabited swamp with no escape route, chosen for "plausible deniability." They traded a militarily sound position for political cover that collapsed within hours.

Then Kennedy scaled back the pre-invasion air strikes. Then, as the invasion faltered on the beach, he canceled the follow-up strikes entirely. Brigade 2506's 1,297 men — outnumbered more than fifteen to one — faced 20,000 Cuban troops with one day's worth of ammunition and no air cover.



Historical Photograph — Public Domain · Members of Brigade 2506 captured by Cuban forces following the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, April 1961. They fought for three days, outnumbered more than fifteen to one, with no air cover and one day's worth of ammunition.

The Bay of Pigs was not a failure of American planning. It was a failure of American nerve.

They fought for three days. They ran out of ammunition. More than 100 were killed; 1,189 were captured and imprisoned for twenty months. The Kennedy administration finally ransomed them for \$53 million in baby food and medicine.

THE PROMISE THAT WAS NEVER KEPT

On December 29, 1962, the survivors of Brigade 2506 gathered at Miami's Orange Bowl. President Kennedy accepted their battle flag and held it up before the crowd. "I can assure you," he told them, "that this flag will be returned to this brigade in a free Havana." That flag has never been returned.

"Every month we have six or seven funerals," says the veterans' association secretary. "When we're gone, we want the world to know what really happened at the Bay of Pigs." They are still waiting. They are dying. And the flag is still in Miami.



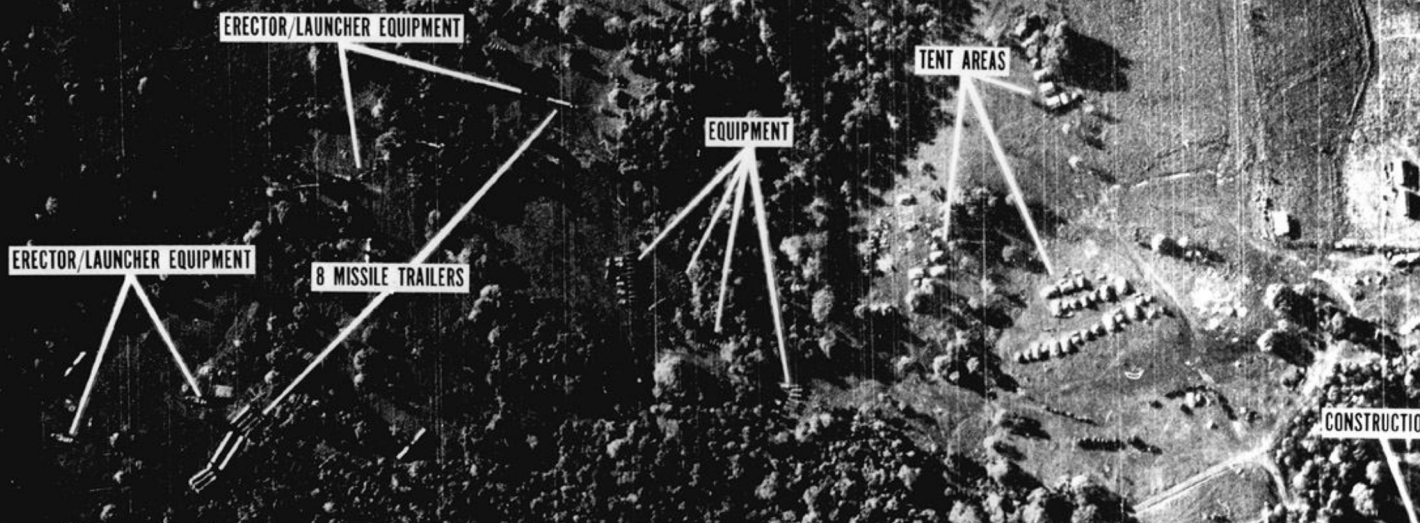
Historical Photograph — Public Domain · President Kennedy accepts the battle flag of Brigade 2506 at Miami's Orange Bowl, December 29, 1962. "I can assure you that this flag will be returned to this brigade in a free Havana." It has never been returned. — U.S. Government / John F. Kennedy Presidential Library

1962 – THE MISSILE CRISIS AND THE PERSISTENT SHACKLES

The Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 brought the world closer to nuclear war than it has ever been. Its resolution is remembered as an American triumph. What is less remembered is what America gave up to make it possible.

On the night of October 27, 1962, Attorney General Robert Kennedy met secretly with Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin. The deal: the Soviets would remove their missiles from Cuba; in exchange, the United States would pledge not to invade Cuba and would secretly remove its Jupiter missiles from Turkey.

MRBM FIELD LAUNCH SITE SAN CRISTOBAL NO 1 14 OCTOBER 1962



Declassified U.S. Government Photograph — Public Domain - The first U-2 photograph confirming Soviet medium-range ballistic missiles under construction in Cuba, October 14, 1962. It triggered the thirteen days of the Cuban Missile Crisis. — U.S. Air Force / John F. Kennedy Presidential Library

Here is what the declassified State Department record shows: the non-invasion pledge was never formally completed. Castro refused to allow UN verification of the missile removal. What existed was, in the words of an internal Nixon-era NSC analysis, "an implicit understanding — never formally buttoned down." A gentleman's agreement, never ratified, never signed, never legally binding on any successor administration.

And yet every president from Johnson to Biden behaved as if it were carved in stone. The Soviet Union ceased to exist in 1991. What remained was not a treaty obligation. It was institutional cowardice wearing the costume of principled restraint.

1960-1962 — OPERATION PETER PAN

Between 1960 and 1962, more than 14,000 Cuban children were airlifted to the United States. Their parents sent them. The operation was called Operation Peter Pan — born of a specific and terrifying fear: that the Castro regime would strip parents of legal custody of their children.

Parents put their children on planes not knowing when — or whether — they would see them again. The children arrived alone, speaking no English, placed in foster homes, orphanages, and church shelters across the United States. Many were as young as six years old.

No political argument reaches the moral core of the Cuba question more directly than this. These were children whose parents looked at what the revolution had become and concluded that sending them into the unknown was safer than keeping them home.



Historical Photograph — CC BY-SA 4.0 (DFELIX / Wikimedia Commons) · Cuban children during Operation Peter Pan, 1961. More than 14,000 children were sent alone by their parents to the United States between 1960 and 1962 — the largest recorded exodus of unaccompanied minors in the Western Hemisphere. Many did not see their parents again for years. Some never did.

CUBA EXPORTS THE REVOLUTION

The standard objection to intervention collapses the moment you examine what the Castro regime actually did beyond its borders. At peak deployment, an estimated 50,000 Cuban soldiers were fighting in Angola. Cuban military advisors operated in Ethiopia. Cuba played a direct role in destabilizing Grenada.

On January 3, 2026, when U.S. forces captured Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, 32 Cuban military and intelligence officers were killed in the operation. They were running Maduro's internal security apparatus — confirmed by Cuba's own government, which declared two days of national mourning. Secretary of State Marco Rubio stated publicly that Cubans had "basically colonized" Venezuela's security services.

The argument that Cuba was "someone else's problem" was always a convenient fiction. Sovereignty is not a shield that covers the export of armed insurgency. It never was.

THE LONG WAR ON AMERICAN SOIL

On February 24, 1996, two unarmed Cessna aircraft operated by Brothers to the Rescue were shot down by Cuban MiG fighter jets in international airspace. Four men died: Armando Alejandro Jr., Carlos Costa, Mario de la Peña, and Pablo Morales. All four were American citizens or residents.

The Wasp Network — the largest spy ring ever discovered on American soil — had provided the intelligence that made the shootdown possible. Its spymaster, Gerardo Hernandez, was convicted of murder conspiracy.

For seventeen years, Ana Belén Montes served as the Defense Intelligence Agency's senior analyst for Cuba. She was also a Cuban intelligence officer. The official damage assessment concluded she was "one of the most damaging spies in U.S. history" who "compromised all Cuban-focused collection programs." She was never paid a cent. She was a true believer. She was released from prison in January 2023 and has expressed no remorse.

ONE OF THE MOST DAMAGING SPIES IN U.S. HISTORY

For seventeen years, Montes memorized classified documents during the day and transcribed them for her Cuban handlers at night. She drafted a 1997 Pentagon report stating Cuba had "limited capacity" to harm the United States — which Fidel Castro publicly called "an objective report by serious people."

This is not merely a spy story. It is a testament to the sophistication and patience of Cuban intelligence: they built a weapon out of pure ideological conviction and let it run for seventeen years undetected.

1980 & 1994 — THE PEOPLE'S VERDICT

In the spring of 1980, Fidel Castro announced that anyone who wished to leave Cuba was free to do so through the port of Mariel. Over the next six months, 125,000 Cubans left. What Castro did not disclose was that he had taken the opportunity to empty his prisons and psychiatric hospitals. It was not an act of generosity. It was an act of aggression, using Cuba's own people as the weapon.



U.S. Coast Guard Photograph — Public Domain · An overloaded boat arrives in Key West Harbor during the Mariel Boatlift, 1980. Between April and October, approximately 125,000 Cubans crossed 90 miles of open ocean to reach Florida. 27 people died en route. — Photo by Raymond L. Blazevic, CC BY 2.0

Fourteen years later, in the summer of 1994, Cubans built rafts from inner tubes, wooden planks, and whatever else could float, and set out across ninety miles of open ocean for Florida. An unknown number died at sea. People do not risk death by drowning, exposure, and sharks because they are mildly dissatisfied with their government.



U.S. Coast Guard Photograph — Public Domain · Cuban refugees crowd the dock at Navy Pier B, Key West, during the Mariel Boatlift, 1980. Fourteen years later, the U.S. Coast Guard would intercept over 35,000 balsaeros in the Florida Straits. On January 12, 2017, the Obama administration ended the policy that had allowed Cubans who reached American soil to remain. — U.S. Coast Guard / National Archives

These two exoduses are the Cuban people's own verdict on the revolution, delivered at the cost of their lives. They voted with their feet. They voted with their lives. America kept looking away.

JULY 11, 2021 — THE LAST TIME THE WORLD ALMOST PAID ATTENTION

On July 11, 2021, thousands of Cubans poured into the streets chanting "Libertad" and "Patria y Vida." It was the largest spontaneous protest in the history of the revolution.

The regime's response was swift, systematic, and brutal. Thousands were arrested. Show trials produced sentences of up to thirty years for the crime of walking in the street. The Boinas Negras — the Black Berets — were deployed against unarmed civilians.

FIRSTHAND TESTIMONY – POLITICAL PRISONER OF 11J

"Once they have you on file, you can't live in peace. So I made the decision to risk my life at sea, and thank God I made it to the land of Liberty: USA."

— Ivan Gasso, political prisoner of July 11, 2021. Now living in the United States.

President Biden issued a statement expressing solidarity with the Cuban people. The Cuban government cracked down harder. The prisoners remained in prison. The most powerful nation on earth responded with a press release.

THE EMBARGO MYTH

For sixty years, the Cuban regime has had a single explanation for every failure it produces: el bloqueo — the blockade. A blockade is a military act. What actually exists is an economic embargo: accounting regulation. The Cuban government turned administrative paperwork into a visual of warships and used it for sixty years to dress up incompetence as heroic resistance.

The country that supposedly blockades Cuba sold it over \$370 million in agricultural goods in 2024 alone. Cuba also trades freely with Canada, the European Union, China, Russia, and most of Latin America.

\$370M+

U.S. ag exports to Cuba, 2024

\$47M

Monthly record Feb. 2025

-62%

Cuba tourism 2019–2023

Cuba's tourism industry generated \$3.185 billion in 2019. By 2023, it had collapsed to \$1.216 billion — a drop of nearly 62% — despite more than \$24 billion invested in hotel construction over fifteen years. The Dominican Republic and Jamaica set tourism records those same years. The embargo didn't build those empty hotels. The Cuban military did.

Cuba claims to offer top-tier healthcare and education — for free. The payment is your liberty.

Cuba's problem is not the embargo. Cuba's problem is the regime.

2015 — OBAMA'S MISTAKE

The normalization deal was announced on December 17, 2014 — the same day the United States released three Cuban intelligence agents, including Gerardo Hernandez: the spymaster convicted of murder conspiracy for the Brothers to the Rescue shootdown. One American contractor and one CIA asset, in exchange for a convicted murderer and two accomplices. That is the math of normalization.

What Obama surrendered was not just leverage: it was America's higher moral ground. For sixty years, the United States had held the principled refusal to confer legitimacy on a dictatorship that had jailed its opponents, executed its enemies, and exiled its children. Obama gave it away, unconditionally, in exchange for a photo op at a baseball game.

On January 12, 2017 — eight days before leaving office — Obama ended "wet foot, dry foot" without congressional approval. The Cuban people found the only door to freedom closed in their faces. The Cuban government received full diplomatic recognition, loosened sanctions, and removal from the State Sponsor of Terrorism list — without making a single democratic concession.

THE MORAL CASE — WHY NOW, WHY ALL OF IT

Every tool in the American foreign policy toolkit has been applied to Cuba at some point in the last 127 years. Every tool. None sustained. None attached to a clear objective. None executed with the commitment required to produce a result.

Donald Trump does not process political cost like a traditional politician. He removed Maduro from Venezuela and, within weeks, eliminated Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei in a joint strike with Israel — two operations every previous administration had deemed too dangerous to attempt. He has declared regime change in Cuba a national security objective for 2026. The fuel blockade he imposed in January is the first effective economic pressure on Cuba since the Missile Crisis.

In the 1950s, Cuba ranked among the top five countries in Latin America by per capita income. Havana was one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the Western Hemisphere. The revolution did not rescue a failed state. It dismantled a country that had genuine momentum. A free Cuba is not a foreign imposition — it is a restoration.

The argument for intervention is not an argument for recklessness. It is an argument for clarity: military, economic, and diplomatic — sustained, coordinated, attached to a non-negotiable objective: a Cuba that holds free elections, releases its political prisoners, and permits the existence of civil society.

THE BRIGADE'S FLAG HAS NEVER BEEN RETURNED TO A FREE HAVANA. IT IS TIME.

President Kennedy's promise, December 29, 1962 — Orange Bowl, Miami

The shackles are gone. The pledge was never signed. The party we made it with does not exist. The current administration has the will, the stated objective, the key personnel, and the historical moment. What happens next will determine whether February 27, 2026 is remembered as the day America finally meant it — or as one more entry in a long list of moments when we said the right words and then played golf.

THE QUESTION BEFORE US

When the last veteran of Brigade 2506 is gone, the last living witness to the moment America blinked will be gone with him. The flag Kennedy promised to return to a free Havana will pass to their children, who will pass it to their children, and the promise will become history's longest-running deferred obligation.

The Cuban people have not stopped making their argument. They made it on rafts. They made it in the streets on July 11, 2021. They are making it right now, in prisons, in darkness, in twenty-hour blackouts, in a country that was once one of the most advanced in Latin America and is now standing in line for cooking oil. They do not need our sympathy. They have had our sympathy for sixty years. They need our action.

This is the window. There will not be another one like it. A president who doesn't process political cost like a traditional politician. A Secretary of State who has spent his career for this moment. A Venezuelan operation that proved it can be done. A fuel blockade already in effect. A Cuban government already talking. The argument has always been there. For the first time in sixty years, so is the will.

SOURCES & CITATIONS

- 01 **Nixon Memorandum on Castro Meeting, April 25, 1959**
U.S. Department of State, FRUS, 1958–1960, Vol. VI. Primary source for Nixon quote on Castro.

- 02 **Bay of Pigs — JFK Library**
Documents Brigade 2506, prisoner count (1,183 captured, 114 killed), \$53M ransom, Orange Bowl ceremony.

- 03 **Bay of Pigs Invasion — CIA.gov**
Official CIA primary source. Confirms landing site change from Trinidad, last-minute air strike cancellations.

- 04 **Cuban Missile Crisis — Declassified Records**
State Department FRUS documents confirm non-invasion pledge was never formally completed.

- 05 **Operation Peter Pan — University of Miami Cuban Heritage Collection**
Documents 1960–1962 airlift of over 14,000 unaccompanied Cuban children to the United States.

- 06 **Wasp Network — FBI Miami Field Office History**
FBI arrested ten Cuban intelligence agents September 12, 1998. Spymaster Hernandez convicted of murder conspiracy.

- 07 **Brothers to the Rescue Shootdown — UN Security Council**
ICAO finding confirms aircraft were in international airspace. Four U.S. citizens/residents killed.

- 08 **Ana Montes — FBI Archives**
"One of the most damaging spies in U.S. history." Arrested September 21, 2001; released January 6, 2023.

- 09 **U.S. Food Exports to Cuba — U.S. Census Bureau / USDA**
\$370M+ in agricultural exports to Cuba in 2024. February 2025: \$47M — highest since 2014.

- 10 **Cuba Tourism Statistics — ONEI**
Tourism revenue: \$3.185B (2019) vs. \$1.216B (2023) — 61.82% collapse despite \$24B hotel investment.

- 11 **Executive Order 14380 — Fuel Blockade, January 29, 2026**
First effective economic pressure on Cuba since the Missile Crisis framework.

- 12 **Trump "Friendly Takeover" Statement, February 27, 2026**
White House press pool transcript. Rubio confirmed as lead negotiator.

- 13 **July 11, 2021 Protests (11J) — Human Rights Watch**
Largest protests in Cuba since 1959. Sentences up to 30 years. Systematic use of special forces against civilians.

- 14 **Platt Amendment, 1901 — U.S. National Archives**
Inserted into Cuba's 1901 constitution at U.S. insistence. Formally abrogated 1934.
