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## Huddleston, Vicki. *Our Woman in Havana*. New York: The Overlook Press, 2018

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“Who do you think you are representing here in Cuba?”

The above question posed by a visiting American democratic congressman to American Ambassador to Cuba, Vicki Huddleston, in February, 2002, summarizes the complexities of diplomatic life for Americans in Cuba, as narrated in Huddleston’s memoir, *Our Woman in Havana*. This three-hundred-and-seven paged chronicle is divided into four parts, with seventeen chapters. It covers a period of slightly over two and half decades and details Huddleston’s involvement with Cuba (both as a diplomat and private citizen), from the time of the administration of U.S. President H. W. Bush in 1989 to the assumption of office by Donald Trump in 2017. The first part of the text focuses on the revitalization of relations with Cuba, Huddleston’s earliest encounters with Fidel Castro, and the non-negligible influence of Cuban-Americans, who have historically wielded significant political influence in Florida. The second part of the work discusses events that transpired in the Havana-based US Section during the administration of President Bill Clinton, which was highlighted by the battle for Elian Gonzalez between Cubans in the Diaspora and their home government. The third part focuses on the presidency of G. W. Bush and the shift toward the tightening of the U.S. embargo against Cuba under the Big Bang Policy<sup>1</sup> (in spite of Cuban cooperation on the location and running of the U.S. Naval Base prison camp at Guantanamo Bay). The final part discusses the strides of President Obama’s administration in normalizing U.S. relations with Cuba and the subsequent reversals under President Trump.

One major thrust of the book is to advocate for a more nuanced perspective of Cuba-U.S. diplomatic ties as multi-layered; the author calls for an interpretation that includes more “shades of gray” and less black and white. For example, the macro-politics of blockades and embargoes are political tools that have been used by both U.S. and Cuban players—including both presidents Bush in the U. S. and both Fidel and Raul Castro in Cuba—to consolidate their political hold in Florida and Cuba, respectively. Such moves were precipitated by the micro-politics of the Bush family (including attempts to garner political leverage for Florida governor Jeb Bush by his brother, George W. Bush), along with the rifts between Fidel Castro and his former in-laws—the Diaz Balarts—who belonged to an influential Cuban American community in Miami. The text traverses the fields of diplomacy and international relations; socio-political history; and legal, humanitarian, security, development, and gender studies as the author unravels her experiences in a male dominated field. She advocates against the myth that post-revolution Cuba-U.S. diplomatic relations had been enmeshed in hostilities by showcasing the longevity of Cuba-U.S. relations, dating back to 1977 during the administration of Jimmy Carter.

The intersections of gender and diplomacy underlie different discussions in the text and constitute the thematic focus of its first part. The volume begins with Huddleston’s earliest encounters with Fidel Castro. The sometimes humorous text starts with a twist in power dynamics wherein Castro tried to assert his masculinity by attempting to undermine the “petite woman,” the only female diplomat of the three women present, to protest the American ‘bloqueo,’ which deprived children from food and medicine. The humanitarian context is unraveled in the second chapter, with stories on immigration, asylum, and return. The activities of rescue workers, with particular mention of the ‘Brothers to the Rescue,’ who sought to rescue Cubans who had left the island for Miami but were trapped on ‘balseros’ (ocean rafts).<sup>2</sup> The risks undertaken by those attempting to escape the island exacerbated by the lack of weather intelligence, inadequate food and water, and lack of permission to fly through Cuban airspace.

Even President Clinton's Wet Foot Dry Foot Policy<sup>3</sup> failed to deter prospective migrants. Within the current context of debates on immigration in Europe and North America, the effectiveness of an approach such as Clinton's remains controversial, especially where developmental challenges exist in the countries of origin, while there remains an exploitative relationship between these countries and the receiving countries.

The second part of Huddleston's work focuses on the challenge of taking up a leadership role in the U.S. interests in September, 1999 under the time of the Clinton administration. Huddleston's examination serves to mitigate the prevalent "myth of hostilities" in the diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba. She established that political relations between U.S. and Cuba date as far back as 1805 with the bid by the then U. S. President, Thomas Jefferson to annex the island after bringing an end to the Spanish Occupation. This was consolidated by the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 which proclaimed that the U.S. will protect the American Continent from European Occupation. In 1898, the U.S. intervened in the Cuban war against the Spanish, leading to significant American investments and a major U.S. presence on the island after the victory over Spain. Huddleston maintains that in spite of the rift after the Cuban revolution, diplomatic relations resumed in 1977, with the establishment of Interest Sections in both countries headed by Principal Officers rather than Ambassadors.<sup>4</sup> In spite of this, the U.S. had the highest number of diplomats in Havana.

The themes of dissidence and securitization in Cuba came to the fore with Castro's heavy deployment of military men across Cuba to fortify the architecture for security surveillance across the island. The sparring between the two countries for custody of Elian Gonzalez, who lost his mother while she attempted a relocation to Miami, reflected overlaps between internal family affairs and state relations in which the ideas of citizenship, conflict of values, media and diplomacy, Cuban American Politics, the Cuban economy and health care system, transnational jurisprudence, and Cuban protest culture<sup>5</sup> were unpacked. The return of Elian with his father to Havana resulted in the Cuban Americans' "Voto Castigo,"<sup>6</sup> which cost Al Gore critical votes in Florida that were needed to win the American presidency during the 2000 presidential elections.

The third part of Huddleston's memoir explores Cuba-U.S. diplomacy under President George W. Bush, with the regime change leading to a gradual transition from initial soft diplomatic approaches to a Big Bang Policy against Cuba. Interestingly, the first generation<sup>7</sup> of Cuban Americans (living predominantly in Miami) championed a total ban on humanitarian, cultural, and religious travels to Cuba by American citizens, despite the longing of the subsequent generation for improved relations with Cuba. Huddleston also addresses several myths regarding Castro's dwindling grip on Cuba and the threat to the survival of Castro's regime from the Western Hemisphere.<sup>8</sup> She asserts that Cuba experienced an economic revival upon its diplomatic alliance with Hugo Chavez after the Russians withdrew their aid. In spite of the economic revival, class distinctions remained a reality in Cuba, especially in neighborhoods outside of Havana, with Afro-Cubans underrepresented in Cuban politics and at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder, even as the government sought to address this through educational opportunities for blacks. For Huddleston, diplomatic activism ensured that she could embark on outreach missions to the dissidents—by sharing radios, creating a network for communication, providing internet and bookshelves for public libraries—while avoiding open confrontation with the Cuban government. (Dissidence was not tolerated in a highly securitized Cuba where local security intelligence and public shaming through the "Acto de Repudio"<sup>9</sup> was common. Animals were also not immune from diplomatic sanctions in Cuba as the ban of Havana an Afghan hound shows. As Huddleston explained, the ban was a diplomatic move to check the excesses of

the Chief of the US Interests Section. This was tagged Doggie Diplomacy in the media to show how animals get implicated through their affiliation within diplomatic rifts. The section also reflects how the divergence of approaches between the Cuban Diaspora, who wanted the removal of Castro, and the dissidents, who preferred change within the existing government, mitigated the impact of Project Varela<sup>10</sup> in spite of endorsement by key personalities from the United States.

The final section examines how political rivalry within America has been a key determinant of stabilization in Cuba-U.S. relations. The contrast in the approaches of the Obama and Trump administrations is but one example. While the former sought the normalization of relations with Cuba, the latter has reinstated economic sanctions, reflecting how party politics and personal rivalries can determine the fate of people within transnational spaces. Obama had upgraded the U.S. Interests Section to a full embassy, removed Cuba from the list of state sponsors of terrorism, removed the Wet Foot Dry Foot Policy, and encouraged greater collaboration between the U.S. and Cuba within the health, environment, legal, and counterterrorism sectors. Trump meanwhile, has reinstated the embargo on Cuba while promising the demise of the Cuban Regime, adopting and reviving George W. Bush's Big Bang approach. Huddleston concludes by emphasizing the need for America to adopt policies that enhance internal development in Cuba and work towards ensuring sustainable political change. This is key especially when considering the fact that Cuban politics is entering a new, post-Castro phase, which situates Cuba's political future more in Havana than in Miami.

*Our Woman in Havana* is important in demystifying the hostilities and myths surrounding Cuba-U.S. relations. The text is one in which the personal experiences of a diplomat are interpreted through historical events and framed by an understanding of how micro- and macro-politics influence the daily lives of Cubans. Huddleston makes some compelling points. For one, while Fidel Castro remains a divisive political figure, it is inaccurate to think that problems such as racial and class discrimination emerged only after the 1959 revolution. From the text, the myriad of assassination attempts on Castro's life—more than any intentional self-perpetuation of power—were major reasons for Cuba's closely-knit security architecture. Cuba's community-driven securitization model could be adapted for a successful fight against terrorism in developing countries. The text, however, needs some basic grammatical editing to enhance readability.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The Big Bang policy purported that the tightening of the embargo against Cuba would lead to a rebellion against the Castro regime and its eventual removal, as the economy would have been stretched beyond the point of elasticity, or its breaking point.

<sup>2</sup> This was a major means of transportation for those who could not afford motorboats, which themselves were often without sufficient gasoline for the trip.

<sup>3</sup> Clinton's policy stated that any Cuban who was rescued from water (with "wet feet") would be returned to Cuba or sent to a third country, while any Cuban who made it to shore (with "dry feet") would be permitted to qualify for expedited permanent legal resident status. Clinton's policy revised the 1966 Cuban Adjustment Act, which permitted all Cuban immigrants to apply for legal status and, ultimately, citizenship.

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<sup>4</sup> The U.S. Interest Section is a *de facto* U.S. Embassy in Havana, located within the Embassy of Switzerland in Havana. Likewise, the “Interests Section of the Republic of Cuba” was located in Washington DC, also within the Swiss Embassy. Official U.S. and Cuban embassies were reopened in both countries on July 20, 2015, following the normalization of relations under Barack Obama.

<sup>5</sup> The expression “La Calle es de Fidel,” which means ‘The streets belong to Fidel,’ captures Castro’s significant connection and influence in Cuba. Castro led several protests including ‘The Million Man March’ organized by alongside his brother Raul. Fidel’s popularity among the common people cannot be underestimated, as it is founded on his administration’s successes in reducing racism, providing access to quality education, and the standardization of healthcare.

<sup>6</sup> Voto Castigo means Punishment Vote

<sup>7</sup> Huddleston distinguishes between two waves of Cuban immigrants to the U.S., creating two Cuban-American generations. The first wave refers to those who arrived between 1959 through the mid-80s, and the second wave to those arriving after the mid-80s.

<sup>8</sup> Castro’s offer to help the United States in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks refutes the myth that Cuba was a breeding state for terrorists. Likewise, the claims that Cuba was developing biological weapons was also falsified.

<sup>9</sup> This translates as the Repudiation Act, as a result of which dissidents were subjected to a sort of tribunal during which their faults were outlined and shameful punishments were meted out, including the loss of economic, political and social benefits (*i.e.*, the right to job opportunities and education; loss of positions within the Communist Party; and ostracization by neighbors).

<sup>10</sup> The Project Varela, named after religious leader Felix Varela, supports laws advocating for democratic political reforms within Cuba, such as the establishment of freedom of association, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, free elections, freedom of religion, freedom to start private businesses, and amnesty for political prisoners.