

December 27, 1979

**Conversation between Soviet Ambassador to Cuba
A.S. Seletskii and Jose Antonio Arbesu, Head of the
USA sector of the Cuban Communist Party Central
Committee**

Citation:

"Conversation between Soviet Ambassador to Cuba A.S. Seletskii and Jose Antonio Arbesu, Head of the USA sector of the Cuban Communist Party Central Committee", December 27, 1979, Wilson Center Digital Archive, TsKhSD, f. 5, op. 77, d. 642, ll. 18-21; translation by Svetlana Savranskaya.

<https://wilson-center.drivingcreative.com/document/111219>

Summary:

Memorandum of conversation between Soviet Ambassador to Cuba and Head of the USA sector of the Cuban Communist Party Central Committee about the US-Cuban relations

Original Language:

Russian

Contents:

Translation - English

FROM THE JOURNAL SECRET

OF SELETSKII A.S. Copy No. 3 Issue No. 2 "03" January 1980

RECORD OF CONVERSATION

with the head of the U.S. sector

of the Americas Department of the CC of the Communist Party of Cuba Jose Antonio Arbesu

27 December 1979

In the conversation at the CC of the Communist Party of Cuba J.A. Arbesu presented some considerations concerning current Cuban-American relations.

The USA policy in the question of normalization of relations with Cuba is determined by two main factors: their military-strategic interests, and the domestic situation, said Arbesu. At the same time, from the military-strategic point of view, there are two policy lines in the USA leadership now: the line of the National Security Council, and the line of the State Department. Thus, Brzezinski thinks that Cuba, "as a result of its economic dependence on the Soviet Union," does not have its own foreign policy, that it is a "Soviet satellite", and that therefore, there is no sense in talking to Cuba. All the questions concerning, for example, the Cuban actions in Africa or in Central America should be discussed with the Soviet Union so that it would "put the needed pressure on Cuba."

The USA State Department takes a different approach in relation to Cuba. They believe that in spite of all those things, the questions concerning Cuba should be discussed with Cuba itself, not with the USSR.

In the last several months Brzezinski line took over in the American leadership, said Arbesu; and that had a negative effect not only on USA-Cuban relations but also on their policy to Latin America in general. The USA instigated the well-known "microcrisis" concerning the presence of the Soviet military training center in Cuba, renewed reconnaissance flights over our territory, conducted provocative maneuvers on their base at Guantanamo and naval exercises near our coasts. All this led to the situation where now we have reached "the lowest point in our relations with the USA since Carter became President in 1977," mentioned Arbesu.

At the same time the State Department does not want to close the door completely, and has shown an interest in maintaining our contacts. American congressmen, businessmen, university professors continue to visit Cuba, though in smaller numbers, and our cultural and sports contacts continue. The State Department, mentioned my interlocutor, agreed to conclude an agreement between the coast guards of our two countries, and allowed our aircraft to fly to the USA, mostly to transport members of the Cuban community for visits with their relatives in Cuba. The Americans were supposed to ratify the agreement on fishing before the end of this year. However, since the USA Congress is currently in recess, the agreement would probably be approved by the USA government with the subsequent ratification by the Senate.

The "gestures" made by the American side toward Cuba earlier remain in force, said Arbesu. Thus, our Interest Section in Washington was allowed to have accounts in American banks, which is necessary for its normal functioning, and to transfer the consular fees to Havana. Cuban citizens residing in the United States still have a right to transfer \$500 to their relatives in Cuba every three months. American tourists are allowed to bring Cuban goods valued up to \$250 into the United States. We consider

all this, reiterated Arbesu, as a sign of the State Department's desire to maintain a certain, although minimal, level of relations as a basis for their future improvement when the circumstances become more favorable.

Arbesu pointed out that since December 1978 the American side no longer showed the initiative to conduct "closed meetings" with the Cubans, during which in the past they exchanged opinions on a broad spectrum of international, especially African and Latin American, problems. It is apparent, said Arbesu, that the Carter administration is now more than convinced that we would not make any concessions in the principled issues of our policy in Africa and in other regions of the globe, especially in the circumstances when the economic blockade of Cuba is being maintained in its fullest form. However, Arbesu mentioned, the Americans show some interest in a dialogue with our Interest Section in Washington, though it has a certain situational character. For example, when the "microcrisis" concerning the presence of the Soviet military specialists in Cuba came up, they discussed it with our representatives at the Interest Section.

The American side also tried to put pressure on us in the question of Nicaragua, said Arbesu. However, they did not make any official statements in that regard. Besides, it is not in Carter's interest to raise this issue because his political opponents could exploit it. If Carter claims that Cuba interferes in Nicaraguan affairs, it would give a reason for his opponents to blame him for not giving the necessary support to Somoza; and this is not in his interest.

Arbesu said that the question of lifting the American economic blockage of Cuba remains frozen, and is not on the agenda now. He mentioned that it might be reasonable to expect that when the USA Congress gathers in session, it would make a decision granting us licenses for purchase of some pharmaceutical products and drugs in the USA. Therefore, now we can speak about only a partial lifting of the economic blockade, emphasized my interlocutor.

Arbesu said that as far as he knew, the Americans did not in any form raise the question of Cuba joining the Treaty of Tlatelolco [in which Latin American countries agreed to make the region a nuclear-free zone], or the Non-proliferation Treaty. Besides, he said, the USA is well informed about our position in those questions.

No doubt, said Arbesu, the beginning electoral campaign in the USA will have more and more influence on their policy toward us. The recent "microcrisis" could be explained by Carter's desire to show himself as a "strongman," who can be "tough" when USA interests are at stake. He wanted to remove the accusations presented by his opponents who blame him for his "weakness."

Besides, mentioned Arbesu, we believe that the so-called "expansionism" will be one of the themes of this electoral campaign in the USA. It will mean primarily the Soviet Union, and its actions in Africa, for example, and it will certainly touch upon us as well.

The electoral campaign which has begun in the USA also led many Senators and Congressmen, who always stood for improving relations with Cuba, not to speak about it publicly. Senator G. McGovern has to exercise caution now because the state in which he will run for reelection [South Dakota] is well known for its conservative electorate. The same could be said about Senator Church [of Idaho]. Other "young Senators [Representatives]," like, for example, F. Richmond, and R. Nolan, even though they are not up for re-election this time, prefer not to mention the question of normalization of relations with Cuba now.

In regards to who the winner will be, said Arbesu, in our opinion it is still too early to make predictions. For example, we do not exclude the possibility of J. Carter winning the election. At the same time, E. Kennedy would be able to ensure more governorships and seats in Congress for Democrats. We should not discount the possibility of the victory of the former CIA Director G. Bush either.

Regarding the Republicans, mentioned Arbesu, governor Reagan has more chances for success than [John] Connally.

In a nutshell, said Arbesu in conclusion, we believe that until the elections and a new President is in the White House, even if that is J. Carter again, we should not expect any significant steps for improving relations with Cuba from the American administration. After the elections a lot will depend on the evolution of the international situation in general. For example, on how the events unfold in Iran and in Central America. For the USA now Iran represents one of the main problems.

ADVISER AT THE EMBASSY OF THE USSR IN THE REPUBLIC OF CUBA

/s/ A. SELETSKII