

Authors Believe Change Possible in U.S.-Cuba Relations

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William LeoGrande and Peter Kornbluh co-wrote "Back Channel to Cuba," officially launched on Monday last week and explained the title means that Havana and Washington have spoken to each other despite their hostilities.

Since 1959, conflict and aggression have dominated the story of U.S.-Cuban relations. LeoGrande and Kornbluh present a new and more relevant narrative. From Kennedy's offering of an olive branch to Fidel Castro after the missile crisis, to Kissinger's top secret quest for normalization, to Obama's promise of a "new approach," the authors reveal a fifty-year record of dialogue and negotiations, both open and furtive, indicating a path toward better relations in the future.

Based mostly on declassified documents, the book created a stir with its revelations of invasions, covert operations, assassination plots using poison pens and exploding seashells, and a grinding economic blockade. However, it chronicles a surprising, untold history of bilateral efforts toward rapprochement and reconciliation.

The authors are currently in Havana for a dual presentation of their work and a similar book by Cuban authors Elier Ramirez and Esteban Morales, also released on Monday, that is based on previously unreleased Cuban documents.

They say Obama will have the stage to lift bilateral relations out of the shadows at the Summit of the Americas next April in Panama. As host country, Panama has verbally invited Cuba,

which would participate for the first time.

Obama might meet Cuban President Raul Castro and they could potentially complete substantive negotiations rather than their handshake during a brief encounter at Nelson Mandela's funeral in December 2013.

"In the coming months this is the opportunity for diplomacy, culminating in the opportunity for Obama to fulfill a campaign promise he made in 2008," Kornbluh said, referring to Obama's stated willingness to meet with Cuban leaders.

LeoGrande pointed out a number of conditions are uncommonly favorable. Obama is in his second term and final term. The presumed Democratic candidate for the 2016 nomination, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, has already advocated a change in Cuba policy, so he would not damage her politically. Most importantly, he added, polls show a majority of Cuban-Americans in South Florida now favor a change.

"I am reasonably optimistic," LeoGrande said. "Obama's been saying ever since he was a candidate that the policy doesn't make sense and needs to change. And Raul Castro has been saying he wants to see a policy change. A lot of things that have prevented change in the United States are old issues."

LeoGrande is a professor of government at American University and Kornbluh is director of the Cuba Documentation Project at the non-governmental National Security Archive.

Edited by Ivan Martínez

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