

The “Meat” in the “Political Sandwich”: Promoting Science, Technology, and Culture in the USIA’s Public Diplomacy Message in Cuba, 1953-1960

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Panel 9: *Beyond the Embargo: New Approaches to U.S.-Cuban Relations During the Cold War*

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Abstract:

This paper addresses the United States Information Agency’s (USIA) public diplomacy effort in Cuba from 1953 through 1960, focusing on the agency’s Havana-based field office. During the Cold War, USIA personnel in Cuba developed messaging for their audience that promoted the U.S. and warned of the dangers of communism, while depending upon a cooperative Cuban media network to distribute their materials on the island. This paper specifically explores the importance of the office’s coverage of U.S. cultural, technical, and scientific achievements during the period by examining the cultural offerings the USIA sponsored in Cuba and the technical and scientific programs the agency promoted, such as the “Atoms for Peace” campaign and Vanguard 1 satellite mission. As the research demonstrates, though post personnel rated anticommunist messaging as their primary objective, the content in these less ideological programs proved effective at attracting audiences and adaptable to Cuba’s changing political climate. Non-ideological materials stressed themes of cooperation and friendship, while emphasizing U.S. superiority over communism in a less direct manner. Staff reports indicated that Cubans preferred such entertaining and informative content to overt anticommunist messaging, which audiences often ignored as they associated anticommunism with efforts to silence critics and quell dissent. Fidel Castro’s emergence in 1959 and his criticism of U.S. policies further complicated local efforts to promote anticommunism. Cuban media outlets, fearful of running afoul of Castro or nationalized under the new political structure, stopped publishing USIA material deemed critical of the government. In response, field office personnel again focused primarily on cultural, technological, and scientific programming. While the USIA developed a more aggressive messaging strategy against Castro throughout Latin America in 1960, agency staff in Havana continued relying on “softer” content to reach their audience. Critics in the U.S. chided the USIA for their “milquetoast” response in Cuba and deteriorating diplomatic conditions during the final months ended even these innocuous attempts at public diplomacy on the island.