

Wayne S. Smith, diplomat who resigned over U.S. policy toward Cuba, dies at 91

He invited controversy with his outspoken advocacy of restoring normal relations between the countries.



By [Matt Schudel](#)

July 7, 2024 at 10:54 a.m. EDT

Wayne S. Smith, an American envoy in Cuba when Fidel Castro took control of the island nation in 1959 and who returned to a diplomatic post in Havana two decades later, only to resign in opposition to the U.S. embargo and other punitive measures against Cuba, died June 28 at his home in New Orleans. He was 91.

He had complications from Alzheimer's disease, said his daughter, Melinda Smith Ulloa.

Mr. Smith was an idiosyncratic blend of blunt-spoken Texan and diplomatic finesse who became one of the country's leading authorities on Cuba during his 25-year career with the State Department. He was first assigned to Cuba, just 90 miles from Key West, Fla., in 1958.

U.S. Embassy staff members were shaking off their New Year's Eve hangovers early on Jan. 1, 1959, when Cuba's strongman president, Fulgencio Batista, fled the country as Castro's forces closed in on Havana.

"I'll never forget Castro's first televised speech," Mr. Smith told a Johns Hopkins University magazine in 1998. "They had released a flock of white doves as a symbol of peace, and one of the doves flew up and landed on Castro's shoulder. A white dove is a messenger in the Cuban religion of Santeria that shows the anointed one."

 **Follow** D.C. region

Follow

Mr. Smith helped organize the sudden evacuation of thousands of Americans from Cuba, which had long been a tropical playground. Castro's regime nationalized U.S.-owned businesses, from sugar companies to hotels, and ultimately declared

Cuba a socialist state.

Mr. Smith was among the last U.S. diplomats to leave the country when the embassy was closed in 1961. Soon afterward, as Castro's rule hardened into a repressive dictatorship, formal relations between the two countries came to an end, and the United States and other countries imposed an economic blockade.

Through the years, Mr. Smith had State Department postings in Brazil, the Soviet Union and Argentina, but he always felt drawn to Cuba and hoped for a rapprochement between the two countries.

"I love the Cuban people," he said in the Johns Hopkins magazine interview. "They are about the nicest I've ever met. I found that in 1958, and since then I've been impressed with the fact that they don't hate anyone."

Over time, other countries abandoned sanctions against Cuba, eventually leaving the United States as the only country still maintaining the embargo. Mr. Smith considered it "obsolete and counterproductive," he wrote in a 1998 essay, depriving the Cuban people of needed goods and American businesses of a nearby market.

He acknowledged that Castro was an autocrat and called for Cuba to improve its record on human rights. But, in his view, the absence of diplomatic relations only served to stoke suspicion and anger on both sides.

"He was not a starry-eyed apologist for the Cuban government by any means," said William Goodfellow, the former executive director of the Center for International Policy, a Washington think tank where Mr. Smith was a longtime fellow. "There is no question that he was the most effective and outspoken opponent of the U.S. policy toward Cuba."

Increasingly, official U.S. policy toward Cuba reflected the attitudes of hard-line anti-Castro Cuban Americans who had fled their homeland. Year after year, as long as Castro remained in power, there would be no diplomatic thaw.

"Cuba seems to have the same effect on American administrations," Mr. Smith often said, "as the full moon has on werewolves."

In the late 1970s, President Jimmy Carter sought to reopen channels with Cuba and end the embargo. Mr. Smith was part of that effort and, in 1979, was put in charge of a U.S. "interests section" in Havana. Fluent in Spanish, he traveled throughout the country and spoke often with Castro.

"I've spent hundreds of hours talking to him," Mr. Smith said in 1998. "It's not too hard to do. A conversation with Fidel Castro can last six hours."

In 1980, Castro announced that Cubans were free to leave the country from the port of Mariel if they could find transport. During a six-month period, about 125,000 people — including some from prisons and psychiatric institutions — arrived in Florida in a chaotic seaborne scramble that became known as the Mariel Boatlift.

Opposition to Cuba was inflamed by the boatlift, and with the election of Ronald Reagan as president in 1980, U.S. sanctions were stiffened. Officials said the Cuban government was trying to export its communist ways to Central America and other places. Mr. Smith argued that Cuba's international interventions were overblown and that continuing the embargo was futile.

“As for keeping the heat on, we have kept it on for 20 years, to no avail,” he said in a declassified State Department cable, provided to The Washington Post by Peter Kornbluh, a Cuba expert at the National Security Archive, a research institute in Washington. “We obviously proceed from totally incompatible perceptions of Cuban reality,” Mr. Smith added in the cable. He denounced the tougher stance toward Cuba as “tragically mistaken.”

After “one disillusionment too many,” he resigned his post in 1982 and left the State Department. He joined the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington and became an adjunct professor at the Johns Hopkins School for Advanced International Studies. He wrote essays for newspapers and foreign policy journals and was a lonely voice in support of opening a dialogue with Cuba.

“Wayne Smith was a titan in the cause of reconciliation,” Kornbluh said in an interview, “a diplomat’s diplomat when it came to Cuba policy, and the dean of the advocacy movement for normalized relations between Washington and Havana.”

Mr. Smith elaborated on his views in his autobiographical “The Closest of Enemies” (1987) and other books. He asked why the United States could have full diplomatic and trade relations with China and Vietnam, but not with Cuba.

“It’s my cause and I just can’t let go of it,” he said in the Johns Hopkins article. “I can’t go off and sail around the world or retire to a mountain meadow while this is still there.”

Studied in Mexico

Wayne Sanford Smith was born Aug. 16, 1932, in Seguin, Tex. The family moved often throughout the state, following his father’s work as an oil-field engineer. His mother was a homemaker.

Mr. Smith completed high school in Corpus Christi, Tex., then entered the Marine Corps after his father signed a waiver allowing him to join at 16. He served in combat during the Korean War and became a drill instructor.

“I was fighting in the winter in the Korean War and decided on a cold night that I was going to be a diplomat,” he later said. “I thought, ‘There has to be a better way to solve problems.’”

He used the GI Bill and a football scholarship to attend what is now the National Autonomous University of Mexico in Mexico City. (Some Mexican colleges have fielded American football teams since the 1920s.) He graduated in 1957 with a degree in Hispanic American literature and joined the State Department later that year.

He received master’s degrees in philosophy and international relations from Columbia University in 1962 and a doctorate in political science from George Washington University in 1977.

Mr. Smith learned Russian for his posting to Moscow from 1966 to 1969. In Argentina in the early 1970s, he voiced internal opposition to U.S. ties to the country’s military regime during its brutal “dirty war” crackdowns on dissidents.

His marriage to Jacqueline Richard ended in divorce. A son from that marriage, Wayne Smith Jr., died in the 1970s. His

second wife, the former Roxanna Phillips, died in 2014 after 55 years of marriage. Survivors include two children from his second marriage, Melinda Smith Ulloa of Washington and Sanford Smith of New Orleans; a sister; and two grandchildren.

Mr. Smith made frequent visits to Cuba to teach or to lead tours for members of Congress and other dignitaries. Cabdrivers in Havana knew him by name, and people flocked around him on the street.

In 1999, he helped organize a baseball game in Havana between the Baltimore Orioles and the Cuban national team, which was considered a breakthrough for the two countries. Mr. Smith taught at Johns Hopkins until 2014 and moved to New Orleans two years later.

After years of stalemate, the United States and Cuba announced a resumption of diplomatic relations in 2014. Since then, the countries have maintained limited relations, and some restrictions on travel and trade are still in place. Nonetheless, Mr. Smith was present when, after more than 50 years, Cuba opened a new embassy in 2015.

“I was standing next to him when the Cuban Embassy in Washington was reopened,” Kornbluh recalled. “Wayne had tears running down his cheeks.”

