

“The revelation by President Obama that Ottawa hosted the secret negotiations that produced the rapprochement will undoubtedly strike Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s critics as a bombshell. — Robert Wright



Then Cuban president Fidel Castro gestures to the crowd and thanks them for their reception as he left the funeral for former Canadian prime minister Pierre Trudeau at Montreal’s Notre-Dame Basilica in October 2000. JULIE OLIVER/OTTAWA CITIZEN FILES

WE WERE AMERICA’S EAR TO THE GROUND IN CUBA

The U.S. has always benefited from our people in Havana, Robert Wright writes.

For Cubans, the Cold War ended Wednesday — a quarter-century after it ended for the rest of us. This fact alone makes U.S. President Barack Obama’s resumption of diplomatic relations with Cuba historic.

But what is most striking to longtime Cuba-watchers is that Washington has agreed to normalize relations with Havana while the Cuban government is still headed by someone named Castro. In the 53-year staring contest that began under President Eisenhower, it is the Americans who blinked.

Many Americans do not know that the original pretext for the diplomatic isolation of Cuba — apart from the unwelcome appearance of communism in the western hemisphere — was Castro’s “confiscation” of U.S. assets in Cuba without compensation. (President Obama did not mention this in Wednesday’s speech, emphasizing instead Americans’ long-standing insistence that Cuba embrace democracy and human rights reforms.)

The Americans have always said that they would not restore normal relations until the Castro regime makes good on these confiscated assets, valued in the early 1960s at \$1.8-billion. (Canadians have been uniquely conscious of this iron-fisted U.S. policy, since punitive bills, including the Helms-Burton Act of 1996, have sought to punish foreigners thought to be “trafficking” in confiscated property.) As for the Cubans, they have always said that they would not sacrifice the socialist principles of the Revolution just to appease the United States.

Make no mistake, on Wednesday, it was the Americans who compromised.

President Obama has said that he does not expect an overnight transformation of Cuban society. But surely he knows better. Washington’s easing of relations with Havana will allow ordinary

Cubans to finally ratchet down the war footing under which they have been subsisting for five decades. To no longer have a superpower as an avowed enemy is itself transformative. The sound of Cubans exhaling will be audible in Washington and beyond.

In one sense, Americans and Cubans have been laying the groundwork for their historic rapprochement for years. It is true that there has been plenty of political posturing on both sides of the standoff, alongside genuine points of friction (including accusations of terrorism and subversion.) But both countries have also been quietly engaged in “confidence-building measures” that include bilateral co-operation

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PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA, speaking of the resumption of diplomatic relations with Cuba

on drug interdiction and a stated refusal by the Cubans to interfere with the U.S. detention camp at Guantanamo. It should come as no surprise that the dialogue that produced the new rapprochement was paired with a garden-variety diplomatic negotiation for a prisoner exchange.

Obama’s speech included words of gratitude for Pope Francis and for the government of Canada. The Vatican has been engaged in its own off-and-on dialogue with the Cuban government since Pope John Paul II’s historic visit to the island in 1998, in part to reinforce official tolerance of Catholicism and, as we now know, to facilitate dialogue with the United States.

As for Canada, the revela-

tion by President Obama that Ottawa hosted the secret negotiations that produced the rapprochement will undoubtedly strike Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s critics as a bombshell.

Officially, the government of Canada has maintained a “proper” diplomatic relationship with Havana since Prime Minister John Diefenbaker declined to follow the U.S. policy of isolating Cuba. But unofficially, as Canadians well know, Liberals (Pierre Trudeau, Jean Chrétien and Lloyd Axworthy, most notably) have been far more willing to “engage” with Havana than their Tory counterparts. As Dief himself insisted, “We had relations with Cuba ... but we did not cuddle up to Castro.”

All Tory prime ministers have since followed Diefenbaker’s example, Stephen Harper most vigorously. In 2012 Harper blocked Cuban

participation at a Summit of the Americas gathering. The same month Fidel Castro wrote a lengthy op-ed piece for the Cuban press titled “Stephen Harper’s Illusions,” in which he criticized the prime minister for allowing Canadian resource companies to despoil the natural environment abroad.

What has always been true of Canada’s relationship with Cuba, however, is that the United States has benefitted from having a well-connected and perceptive NATO ally on the ground in Havana. The men and women Canada has sent as ambassadors to Cuba are widely acknowledged to be among the brightest lights in the foreign service. This is no accident. In the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962, for

example, Canadian diplomats played an indispensable role for American intelligence by reporting on Soviet activities to dismantle their nuclear installations in Cuba. Again in 1976, when Prime Minister Trudeau returned from his state visit to Cuba, it was of more than passing interest to the U.S. State Department to know what the Canadians had discovered there.

Little is known about the actual service Foreign Affairs Canada provided the Obama administration over the last year. But two things seem likely. It has been the policy of the Canadian government since Diefenbaker that Canada would not presume to “broker” a deal between Washington and Havana.

Nothing that President Obama said Wednesday suggests that Canadians provided anything but a neutral (and well-concealed) site for what were, essentially, bilateral negotiations. But if it should come to light that Canadian diplomats with experience on the Cuba desk worked behind the scenes to facilitate these negotiations, Canadians ought not to be surprised.

“Change is hard,” President Obama told Americans Wednesday. “And change is even harder when we carry the heavy weight of history on our shoulders.”

He was right about this, and Canadians have always known it. Pierre Trudeau ventured to Cuba in 1976 against the wishes of his closest advisers and in the knowledge that Canadian public opinion was against him. But he went anyway.

“In the world today you don’t only seek links with countries that are your exact mirror,” said Trudeau en route to Havana. “You seek links with everyone.”

The political stakes for President Obama are far higher than they ever were for Trudeau, but the end game is the same. The Cold War is over. Cubans and North Americans can agree to disagree.

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OPINION

Canada’s female engineers still face barriers in the workplace

Christine Smith writes that she has been openly threatened.

Shelley Page’s recent article in the Citizen about the Montreal Massacre contained the most profound and meaningful observation that I have read about that horrendous event: “They weren’t killed for being daughters or girlfriends, but because they were capable women in a male-dominated field.” I’m a mechanical engineer and I was in the graduate degree program at Concordia University in 1989. I clearly remember the events of that terrible night of Dec. 6 and the weeks, months and years that followed.

Canadian engineers are recognized by the iron ring worn proudly on the small finger of an engineer’s working hand. Regrettably, that same ring can make women a target. I will never forget being on the metro in Montréal shortly after the shootings and having men point their index finger at me and pull the trigger. While standing at Vendôme station, I recall two men standing near me loudly proclaim that the shooter didn’t do a good enough job because, “look what they are making engineers out of these days.”

Less than one year after the shooting I was in a meeting with about 70 men at a large Canadian aerospace company in Toronto. A senior materials engineer started to muse about impact testing and said “where is Marc Lépine when we need him?” I was one of only two women in the room, the other was delivering the coffee trolley, and I was too shocked and too junior to issue a meaningful retort. Now more than 20 years later, I deeply regret not making a scene. Over the past 25 years there have been many similar events, but the iron ring remains firmly in place on my right hand.

Many women in technical roles, including me, believed that the shooting in 1989 was a watershed moment, things would get better. Regrettably, after being in the profession for

“I clearly see that things have gotten worse for women in engineering.

more than 25 years, I clearly see that things have gotten worse for women in engineering. I can’t recall a job where I have not been verbally threatened by male engineers or managers and in two instances, physically threatened. My way of dealing with these encounters has been to change jobs and move to different companies. This has proven to be an unsuccessful strategy since this behaviour is widespread. The revelations of the poor treatment of women in the RCMP, the military and at the seat of federal power in Canada may have been a shock to many, but certainly few women in male-dominated fields were surprised by this news.

As an exercise, I reviewed the websites of engineering companies in Ottawa, Calgary, and beyond. Many companies post pictures and bios of their senior management teams and boards of directors on their websites. Incredibly, there seems to be no embarrassment in showing large groups of white male faces. Most startling was Ottawa, with its reliance on military and very few companies with any women in the senior management ranks.

I have never understood why a mystique surrounds scientific roles and engineering in North America. Why are men threatened because a woman understands physics, chemistry, and math? I have met many women engineers from Eastern European countries who were encouraged at a young age to pursue technical specialties. We need to encourage our daughters to pursue professions that develop their natural talents and satisfy their interests. We need to press government into encouraging the recruitment of women into senior management roles, especially of companies receiving contracts courtesy of the Canadian taxpayer.

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